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SCREEN

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SCREENINGS:
BROADCAST TELEVISION,
CLOSED CIRCUITS,
INDEPENDENT VIDEO

TALK, TALK, TALK

MARGARET MORSE EXAMINES THE SPACE OF DISCOURSE IN TELEVISION NEWS, SPORTCASTS, TALK SHOWS AND ADVERTISING

INTRODUCTION

¹ Frederic Raphael, 'The Language of Television' in Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (eds), *The State of the Language*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, p 309.

*Television is not the 'dream factory' which Hollywood was once said to be by dour sociologists: it is a reality factory. It is truer to life than life is. I am inclined to believe that confession is its essential mode.*¹

*In some way language puts forth 'empty' forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to himself and which he relates to his 'person' at the same time defining himself as an 'I' and a partner as 'you'.*²

² Emile Benveniste, 'Subjectivity in Language' in *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gables, University of Miami, 1971, p 227.

TALK FLOWS CONSTANTLY on television, synchronised with images which modify the mode in which we, the viewers, are addressed. Some talk concerns us, recognises our presence and is addressed to us – some, even some direct address, is not concerned with us, pretends we are not there and is addressed to someone somewhere else. This article investigates varieties of spatial representation on television and their tie to specific enunciative stances in the relationships of discourse.

³ Roland Barthes, 'Historical Discourse', in Michael Lane (ed), *Structuralism: A Reader*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p 155.

Perhaps because TV talk is fashioned from the stuff of everyday life, television itself seems more 'real' and everyday than other media. But if television is a 'reality factory', its means of production are not the 'realism' of the novel or the cinema, based on 'pure and simple' narration of the facts³, a *story* without a narrator, but rather *discourse* and the self-referential reality of human dialogue. Discourse is 'every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way'⁴; its persons are 'I' and 'you'; its basic tense is the present or 'the time at which one is speaking', 'the coincidence of the event described with the discourse that describes it'.⁵ *Story*

⁴ Emile Benveniste, *op cit*, p 209.

⁵ *ibid*, p 222.

and *discourse*, then, are two planes of language, the former suppressing subjectivity in order to refer to an objective and separate realm of space and time inhabited by others (he, she and it), the latter a plane of subjectivity in which a person, 'I', adopts responsibility for an utterance and calls for intersubjective relations with a 'you' in the here and now.

Media as well as genres may be categorised according to where each stands on the continuum of discourse and story.⁶ The cinema presents itself as story – its screen segregates the incommensurable realm of the story with its 'impression of reality' from the realm of the audience with its relations of proximity and potential for discursive exchange. Television, despite the amount of drama which appears on it⁷, is a strongly discursive medium. Not only do a large number of its genres under discussion here – news, sportscasts, talk shows and advertisements – employ direct address to the viewer; but also, television itself, although it is just an electronic machine and a piece of furniture, speaks to us from a position of subjectivity, as in 'We'll be right back...'. The television and the talking heads on it are not, however, received as truly present to us, but as quasi-subjects. We know that elsewhere discourse may be 'real', but in our living rooms that same discourse is imaginary. What television offers us, the viewers, is not intersubjectivity, but *the impression of discourse*. This new mode of fiction simulates the primary means by which we assimilate perceptions as *our* experience; through discourse we maintain a sense of the real through dialectical relationships with consciousnesses other than our own.

Television has the potential to be a truly discursive medium, one in which every receiver is also a transmitter.⁸ The history of the development of television as a social complex is one of the suppression of other technological possibilities in favour of a model of *broadcasting*, based on a few centralised transmitters and a multitude (but not a 'mass')⁹ of private receivers. Thus, in its actual technological and social form, television is decidedly *one-way*, serving as 'a new and powerful form of social integration and control,¹⁰ and preventing rather than serving communication in the process.¹¹ The broadcasting model is then based on 'a deep contradiction'¹² and brings with it endemic problems of investment, production control and financing as well as problems related to feedback 'reduced to the lowest point compatible with the system'.¹³ These problems of television as a social institution and as a one-way transmission of 'commentary on other events'¹⁴ are masked by the *fiction of discourse* within the televisual emission. As an *act of enunciation* – of transmission and reception – television is centrally controlled; receivers are not subjects but rather objects whose influence on transmission is reduced to switching channels or to indirectly putting pressure on networks, government or advertisers. As an *utterance* – the actual messages of the television, both as a whole and in specific genres – the television transmission offers itself to us as a quasi-subject addressing us personally and directly as a 'you'. The implications of this new mode of fiction will be considered in the conclusion of Part Two. Part One investigates the discursive form of the television message as utterance, showing particularly the spa-

⁶ See Gérard Genette 'Boundaries of the Narrative', *New Literary History* Fall 1976, vol 8 no 1, pp 1-15; and Christian Metz, 'History/ Discourse: Note on Two Voyeurisms', *Edinburgh '76 Magazine*, pp 21-25 and also 'On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema', *Film Language*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp 3-15.

⁷ See Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, New York, Schocken, 1975, p 59: 'But it seems probable that in societies like Britain and the United States more drama is watched in a week or weekend, by the majority of viewers, than would have been watched in a year or in some cases a lifetime in any previous historical period.' My point is that drama on television is couched within an overall and pervasive discursive form, different than theatre or the cinema.

⁸ See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media,' in Horace Newcombe (ed), *Television: The Critical View*, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp 462-493.

⁹ Jeanne Allen treats the suppression of a two-way model for television in Ann Kaplan (ed), *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol 2, University Publications of America, 1983, pp 109-119. Raymond

- Williams explains why 'mass communications' is a misnomer in *Television*, op cit, p 23ff.
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- ¹⁰ Raymond Williams, op cit, p 23.
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- ¹¹ See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, op cit, p 464.
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- ¹² Williams, Enzensberger and Allen each develop aspects of a contradiction within the institution of broadcasting. Here, the contradiction between enunciation and utterance is addressed.
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- ¹³ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, op cit, p 464.
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- ¹⁴ Raymond Williams, op cit, p 30ff.
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- ¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 17-18.
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- ¹⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1978, p 96.
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- ¹⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, 'Enunciation', in Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University, 1979, p 327.
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- ¹⁸ Seymour Chatman, op cit, p 102.
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- ¹⁹ In his 'Il est là, je le

tial relations between interlocutors, 'I' or 'we' and 'you', or *discourse space*. A comparison between *story space* in the cinema and *discourse space* as a virtual form of direct address in television will show the distinctive properties of television as a whole. Specific differences in the construction of *discourse* and *story space* will then be discussed in a number of television genres: news, sport, talk shows and ads.

I. TALKING HEADS

*There are three different looks associated with the cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth.*¹⁵

The cinema denies the looks associated with the partners in discourse, the camera-narrator and the audience-addressee, in order to establish an objective *story-space*, 'the segment of the world actually shown on the screen; implied story space is everything off-screen to us but visible to the characters or within earshot, or alluded to by the action.'¹⁶ The story seems to come from nowhere, told by no one; the characters within story-space seem unaware of our presence – they do not look at us, or if they do, they don't see us, they see another character. We are carefully segregated from story-space by the screen and the 180° rule (which means that we never 'bodily' enter story-space via the eye of the camera). Sometimes there is a narrating voice-off in documentary or fiction film – this voice emanates in imagination from discourse space – the audience side of the screen – but our interlocutor remains invisible to us as audience. We must construct an imaginary presence from the voice quality much as the reader of a novel constructs the implied author, 'an imaginary speaker reconstituted on the basis of verbal elements which refer to him'¹⁷. Because the narrator is suppressed, discourse space in the cinema is implicit, the space of an agency which causes marks of the act of narration in the story. *Discourse space* is not then 'the framed area to which the implied audience's attention is directed by the discourse'¹⁸, but rather the space once occupied by cameras and other agencies of production, now occupied by the cinematic audience. The audience is then in the spatial position of both 'I' and 'you' and can identify with either – but its greatest concern is identification with the separate realm of the story from a position of separateness and safety.

In television, however, it seems that the three looks are not denied but acknowledged. We are offered visible as well as audible representations both of one or more narrators at times and also of the audience-addressee whose space we by implication share. Discourse space features the inclu-

sion of the act of narration in the representation of a story; it spreads itself like another plane over the story space of television and encompasses our living room as well. Narrators as hosts, presenters, news- and sportscasters look directly out of the screen at the viewer position at one time or another. It is this look which is the prime constituent of discourse space, establishing an implied narratee, a relation between actually 'empty' subject positions. The tube or lens is no longer a fixed boundary between the planes of story and discourse; that boundary shifts forward and backward from us into the illusory depths of the tube – but always includes us in the implied discourse space.

Actually, of course, discourse space is an imaginary construct based on denying the look of the camera. Neither narrator nor narratee are present to each other – the narrator addresses an empty lens. The narratee then can feel 'looked at' only by denying the camera's mediating look. Furthermore, the narrator is but a representative of and substitute for the whole space of production which remains invisible; the narrator himself, or, less often, herself is a construct of image and voice who can look but cannot see, who can speak but cannot hear. The subject-narrator of television is 'confessional', holding a one-way conversation, calling forth an addressee who never becomes an 'I' except in the vague and inclusive form of 'we', annexed to an indistinct mass of others.¹⁹ Television is not completely one-way, however, but rather an imaginary discourse on the one hand and a virulent circle of feedback on the other (to be discussed in Part Two).

But nevertheless, the strong impression of television as a subjective presence is fostered at several levels:

1) the television itself occupies three-dimensional space *with* us; it speaks to us as a voice embodied by the box. An electronic arm of the space of production is with us in the simultaneous present of 'liveness'²⁰, showing us the world as it happens. The television is situated half like a partner in a conversational circle, half like the centre of a proscenium arch in the theatre²¹, i.e. part partner, part spectacle.

2) the programming of television is accompanied by the constant discursivity of a story-teller holding the flow of miscellaneous images together. The coherence of television is largely due to this continuous self-referential subjectivity. Within and between programmes there are constant relays of words and looks between narrators, of graphics and verbal segues over images, frames and wipes for sequential shifts of scene or story and a continual use of narrative images in the trailers which precede a programme or in the recaps which follow the story itself. US television is conceived as an ongoing transmission which the viewer watches intermittently and often with low-level attention. Furthermore, programming is constantly interrupted by the foreign material of commercials. Discursive intrusions over and between story space are a pervasive feature, no matter what the genre, and are interpreted as 'live' or spoken in the present.

3) There is also a highly articulated chain of looks and denials of looks between narrators, characters of a story and the viewer which separates

vois, il me parle', *Communications* no 38, 1983, pp 98-120, Eliséo Véron develops the importance of this vague 'we' in the enunciation of television news. The main problem with Véron's argument is that direct address is far more pervasive, at least in American television, and hence cannot be considered a meta-operator or mark of identification of the news or informational discourse alone. Nor is it an operator of defictionalisation; in a larger sense what we have is a new kind of fiction, the fiction of discourse.

²⁰ Jane Feuer, 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology', in E Ann Kaplan, op cit, pp 12-22, discusses the ideology of 'liveness' which is related to the argument of television as fictional discourse that I am developing here.

²¹ See Dara Birnbaum, 'Working Notes for "Local Television News Program Analysis for Public Access Cable Television"' (1978), in Dan Graham (ed), *Video-Architecture-Television: Writings on Video and Video Works 1970-1978*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1979, pp 77-85, especially her comparison of the home viewing situation and the constellation of positions of production. She compares the home viewing constellation to a proscenium arch; I would add that it is also close to a conversational circle.

²² This section is based on my paper to the conference on Mass Culture, Center for 20th Century Studies, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee in April 1984, 'Newsspeak: Narrating the News on Television', which develops the situation of narration rather than the entire act of enunciation.

²³ The absence of a studio audience is far more reliable an indication of 'news' or information than direct address by a narrator or what Véron calls the 'eye-eye axis', which he sees as the prime index.

the space 'in' the tube into *story* and *audience space*. The chain of articulations differs by genre and even stylistically by programme.

While story space has developed along a complex logic of the retinal image in painting and photography since the Renaissance and along a logic of matching screen positions and vectors of movement to create whole, continuous space in the classic Hollywood film, discourse space obeys no such logic of realism wherever it intrudes upon the story image. Its logic of linkage is that of subjective relations based on proxemics and on the shared associations of a symbolic system rather than on optical reality: discourse space is not 'creative geography' or an analogue of the objective world of space and time. There is, in fact, very little 'realistic' representation of space left in television, as shall be seen in the following investigation of genres.

The News

National network news²² in the United States is characterised by the *visual presence* of one or more narrators privileged to address the viewer directly as well as by the *absence* of a narratee or studio-audience – the only narratee is the implied viewer.²³ Story and discourse space in the news correspond, but not completely, to the outside world where news events occur and the studio where they are narrated. A series of conventions have evolved which segregate story and discourse and articulate the transitions between them:

1) The *discourse of the television itself* as quasi-subject often precedes and follows specific programmes in the form of an anonymous announcer's voice, trailers or graphics over other programming, or over the newsroom itself. News 'music' can also be considered as part of this level, though it pretends to emanate from the news gathering process. The constant presence of the machine-subject is not indicated by a personalised visual presence – the box itself is the body of the Cyclops.

2) The *visible narrator(s)* of the news is the *anchor*, who typically stares frontally at the lens whenever he is narrating. This look and the opening salutation are direct address uniting the implied discourse space of the viewer's home with the explicit discourse space of the studio. Despite the 'objectivity' of the language of presentation, the virtual positions of discourse establish an 'I-you' relation to the viewer – narratee of the news. This 'anchor' position of talking head is shared by hosts and presenters in many other genres of television; it is probably most responsible for 'the impression of discourse' in the viewer.

3) *Intradiscursive space* includes all those who are privileged to address the camera directly as well as to talk among themselves – anchor(s), reporters and commentators. The intradiscursive level is more 'real' in that it is not the imaginary address of anchor to the lens; it underlines the subjectivity and reality of the discourse. The position of the viewer is indeterminately and ambiguously 'we', seemingly included, but actually excluded from the discussion. At times the viewer is included in the group with a look. There are different levels of access and proximity to



Visible narrator. CBS anchor Walter Cronkite in front of global map.

the viewer among the subjects of discourse: reporters and commentators must pass through the look and space of the anchor, often by means of a 'toss' or a glance to the right or left before each may address the viewer in a 'second degree' direct address. Among themselves, however, the inhabitants of intradiscursive space can enjoy more egalitarian relations; the 'happy talk' in local news programmes as well as the 'patter' that goes on under closing credits emphasises that news discourse is not mere spectacle but an independent reality. Note that intradiscursive space is not necessarily a unified three-dimensional space: it may be electronically united space. In any case, it gives the impression of being in front of the viewer and including him or her in a group ('we').

4) *Wallpaper versus window*: the narration of the news includes by convention a background behind the anchor (or other talking head) and also a framed space slightly above and to the left or right of the speaker. In the news, these two kinds of space have come to have different functions: The background may be electronically manipulated with a chroma-key to be of anything – most often maps of hemispheres or other symbols of a viewpoint from a realm outside the world. Or the background may be of a bank of monitors symbolising the same thing – an ideal space or a nowhere where information is gathered. We learn about the world from a place of narration essentially outside of it. This background space is 'wallpaper'. (With the coming of large screen projection of the television image, the television image itself may function as 'wallpaper' for the home viewer.)

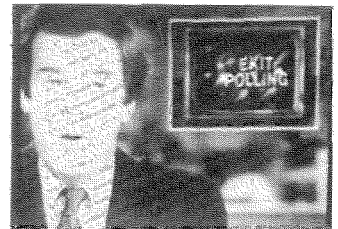
The window has a totally different status: in a 'tell-story' it represents *story space* within discourse space. Film or video may appear in it, or a logo or other graphic symbol may appear in relation to the verbal narration, much like a thought balloon in the comics. Conventionally, the anchor ignores his 'thoughts' unless there is a mistake in synchronising verbal narration and image. Note that the television image is conceptually divided into a *collage* of anchor, background and window, plus, at times, overlaid graphics of narration. Unlike cinematic space, the image is not only of mixed discursive status, it includes material in different scales and means of representation (video, photo, drawing and graphics).

The above are the primary constituents of *discourse space*. The *transition to story space* may be accomplished in a number of ways: for example, the window may enlarge/advance to fill the entire screen in a 'squeeze frame'; or there may be a look off-screen and a verbal toss to a reporter; or, there may be a cut to story space, often with graphics (discursive in status) over the image. The following constituents of *story space* are discussed in order of degree of story/discourse space, not in the order in which they may be assembled in an actual news story:

5) The *sound bite* is pure story: both sound and image emanate from the other space about which the news is reporting. Sound bites occupy a very miniscule space in a news story, but they seem to be essential for the sense of authenticity they generate. Sound bites often consist of a comment made in interview, a bit of a speech, at times ambient sound around a disaster site, etc. Seldom is a political candidate, for example, allowed



Intradiscursive space: anchor and commentator in discussion on ABC.

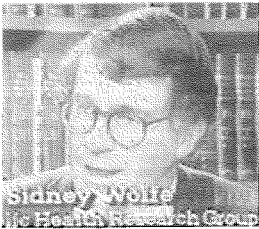


ABC anchor Peter Jennings with 'window'.

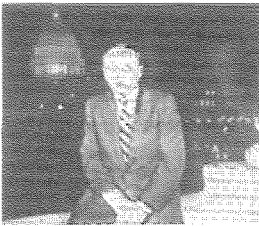
to develop a concept, much less give a speech. The viewer-narratee is in virtual discourse space, shared with the reporter of a particular story.

6) In *voice-over narration*, the image is story, while the sound emanates from the virtual discourse space shared by reporter and viewer. Most often the visual field is of material taped earlier on video, but it may be 'live': the visuals may also consist of animated maps (as in, for example, the American invasion of Grenada, from which reporters were excluded). In that case, the visuals are ambiguously narrative and subjective, rather than objective story space. Graphics of narration may also intrude over story space. There is also the diagonal stripe or news banner over the image (on ABC news) which announces by implication 'this is a story' and 'we are telling it', signalling the discursive space outside the image.

7) The *news interview* may include a reporter and an interviewee or source of the news. This position is the most interesting and characteristic of news story space; it is of mixed discursive status, for while the reporter can pivot and talk to us, the viewers, or to the interviewee, the subject of the interview *does not look at the camera* or hence at the viewer. (This prohibition extends to interviews conducted in a studio.) Like the inhabitants of story space in the novel or film, the interviewer must pretend to be unaware of the camera and to address all responses to the second-degree narrator, the reporter. In other words, the interview is the site of a *denial* within the programme image; we cannot 'share' looks with the inhabitants of the world. The public, then, can never speak among itself as mutual subjects; it must be alienated from itself and mediated by the television itself as subject. The interviewee is in the third person, while the viewer is part of a 'we' of discourse.



upper: a reporter addresses viewer with Capitol Hill in the background.



lower: a reporter addresses viewer with Capitol Hill in the background.

8) In the *stand-upper*, the reporter addresses the audience directly, with a symbolically significant background of story space. The narrating reporter is standing up rather than behind a desk like the anchor; he is 'further away' from the viewer. In this position, the reporter's and the viewer's gaze are mediated by the anchor, i.e. the reporter is using direct address but by implication to the anchor, not directly to us, and we, the viewers, occupy the anchor's position. A typical story background is a view of the White House, of flags in the United Nations lobby, of wheat fields waving, etc. depending on the story. The visuals may actually have no direct connection to an event, but represent it symbolically. Nonetheless, the story space background acts as an indicator that the reporter is really 'there'. The conjunction of story space and narrator verifies the authenticity of the narrative.

The interview and the stand-upper mix story and discourse space; especially in the interview there are not clear frames or boundaries of discourse which are carefully segregated – only the denial of a look indicates who occupies discursive space with us, the viewers, and who inhabits the separate realm of the story. The mixing of discursive status in space is a typical feature of TV news, but it is also found in other television genres, including advertising and music television. The imaginary boundary established by the denial of the look is a significant cultural convention; it is neither natural nor universally applied – the medium itself and its

representatives are privileged exceptions, sharing a fictive space of discourse with us.

9) *Monitor space*: recently a way of presenting the news has become a common practice in all but prime-time commercial network programming. Rather than relaying between anchor-reporter-interviewee, the logic of interfacing monitors allows anchors and reporters in the studio to speak directly to an interviewee. Unlike a 'window', a monitor image can see and speak directly into the discourse space of the studio, as well as be seen and heard. Typically, an anchor pivots around to a monitor and with his (all network news anchors are currently male in the US) back to the viewer, interviews a source. The television image then includes the conversing pair. When the monitor image advances to fill the entire screen, the viewer, by implication, takes the anchor's position. The gaze of the interviewee is frontal and directly aimed at the viewer – but it counts as being aimed at the anchor. (The same rules apply to studio interviews of a source in 'real' as opposed to monitor space – any direct gaze at the viewer is first captured by an over-the-shoulder shot of the reporter or anchor. The viewer alternates between being in implied discourse space across from the anchor, being an onlooker and taking the anchor's position.

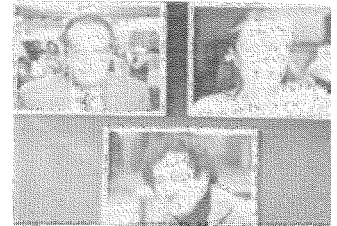
Sometimes multiple interviews and discussion can be conducted between talking heads in a bank of monitors. What is strange is that these tiny heads are facing frontally, implicitly toward the anchor, and thus the viewer, but they are conversing with each other. The interfacing monitor means of presenting the news allows other disorienting spatial relations between conversants: for example, a giant head on a monitor requires a reporter to gaze awkwardly upward to talk. The logic of the monitor furthers the breakdown of vectors linking subjects in discourse as well as a sense of location *per se*²⁴; interlocutors need no longer be present to each other in the same three-dimensional space, and more importantly, need no longer be positioned as if they were (as in the cinema). Talking heads which can 'see' us can appear anywhere and in any size. The role of the monitor in surveillance and computers will tend to naturalise this as yet disconcerting and disorienting means of discourse. It will also become more difficult to determine the status of discursive exchange – does a statement by a talking head on a monitor entail the adoption of responsibility for statements by a subject and the possibility of consequences in the 'real' world – or is it meant 'as if' it were discourse?

Sportscasts

Presuming the sportscast²⁵ is 'live', occurring at the time of the game, sportscasts differ from newscasts in that, though narrators are aurally present almost all the time, they are most often visually absent from the screen. Furthermore, the crowd as a visible counterpart of the narratee at home plays a significant role, both visually and in terms of crowd noise, creating a 'phantom crowd effect' in the viewer's living room. Both nar-



A reporter questions a source speaking on a monitor.



Multiple monitor discussion: the conversants face us but talk to each other.

²⁴ Véron makes an excellent point about the introduction of the body into representation in the news; however, the news is currently in the US taking forms which actually controvert the usual cues of position and proximity.

²⁵ This section is based on an analysis of football telecasts in my article, 'Sport on Television: Replay and Display', in E. Ann Kaplan, op cit, pp 44-66; the entire enunciative situation is not, however, addressed there.

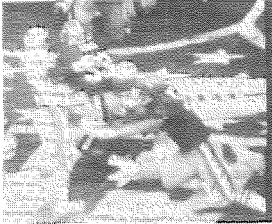


image of the football field with
narrator's voice-over.

rators and narratee are in an ambiguous position in regard to the crowd in the stadium. The narrators, though they are actually in a press box, lend the impression of being near, perhaps behind and to the side of the viewer, establishing themselves as well as the viewer 'in' the stadium crowd. The crowd itself is ambiguously part of story-space, at the game or event and yet separate from it; depending on the grip of the moment, the viewer 'in' the imaginary crowd is 'in' story space or discourse space.

The one item which is unambiguously story space is the actual site of an action or game. This space is not only narratively moulded through spatial distortions and temporal manipulation through replays and slow-motion, it is also constantly intruded upon by graphics over it, squeeze frames of players and their statistics, etc, which are discursive in status. Sportscasts achieve a very strong identification of the viewer with the crowd and with players in the game. Why don't the constant intrusions of discursive material destroy that pleasure and 'bring the viewer out of it'? First, the television medium as a whole is strongly discursive in form – there is no effect of estrangement or of a sudden injection of rationality into the situation of the viewer. Next, the pleasures of story and discourse are not mutually exclusive. While captives in Plato's cave were told stories which seemed to come from nowhere, but rather to be 'real', in Plato's *Symposium* a significant part of the pleasure of an evening of stories is the discursive relation to the storytellers. Certainly too, while the engrossing identification with bits of sport action in television is not lacking, the pleasures of the viewer are also those of quasi-subjective relations with the narrators or sportscasters.

Talk Shows



show host Johnny Carson
interacts between guest and
rs.

The television talk show bears some resemblance to the news magazine show; however, while the news magazine is addressed directly to the home viewer, the talk show is distinguished by the visible and/or audible presence of a studio audience as explicit narratee; the viewer occupies implied discourse space or is placed 'in' the studio audience. The presence of a 'stage' which separates studio audience from guest celebrities is a complicating factor – a stage already signifies another realm. Performances such as lyric song may occur using direct-address; we know we are neither the object of the look directed at us nor the subject of the lyrics. The talk show host acts as mediator between realms of stage, studio audience and viewer. However, the relation of the host to the home-viewer can vary considerably, from one which makes him or her into a voyeur – never explicitly included with a direct look – to one in which the host and viewer enjoy a collusive relationship of 'us' versus 'those celebrities' (which become the butt of wry looks 'shared' between host and viewer). Interestingly enough, *neither the celebrities nor the studio audience* are supposed to look at the camera; only the host, his sidekick and other representatives of the show have that option. When that option is not exercised, as in one US daytime talk show specialising in controversial material (*Dona-hue*), it may be part of a strategy: the material may offend the viewer or

arouse anger, but that arousal of emotions will not be directed at the host or the show. The talk show may then be just that – a spectacle of discussion separate from the viewer; or the viewer may enjoy a special relationship with the host, much like the relation between story-teller and narratee which Freud described in his description of ‘smut’ in *Jokes and the Unconscious*²⁶.

²⁶ In the Strachey translation, New York, Norton, 1963, pp 97-100.

²⁷ Cited in J Laplanche and J B Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, New York, Norton, 1973, p 317.

Advertising Messages

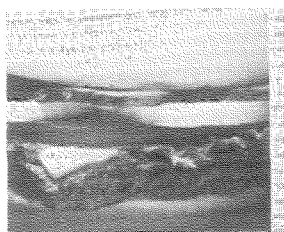
TV advertisements always include some element of direct address to the viewer, but this element ranges from the exclusively discursive ‘Hey kids! Need credit?’ low-budget, hard-sell, local ads – the visuals for which show a salesman, the store, the items and the prices – to the extreme of total fantasy story space accompanied only by quiet voice-over mentioning the name of a product or a corporation. But before considering enunciative stances within advertising, perhaps it is necessary to consider the status of ads in general – they are not taken ‘seriously’ but are rather treated as different in kind than other kinds of material on television, i.e. not as lies, but rather as fantasies. Freud in ‘The Unconscious’²⁷ compared fantasies ‘with individuals of mixed race who, taken all round, resemble white men, but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other, and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges of white people’. Ads live off their proximity to the programming in which they are embedded or in between – and ads are the source of revenue for the commercial television system. Yet ads themselves are carefully distinguished and set off from other programming, not only by fade-outs or cuts but also in the mind of the viewer. It is also part of the social contract of advertising (largely unspoken or unwritten) that advertising should not ‘look’ real (controversial exceptions on US television were the Texaco ‘news’ ads during the oil crisis). Ads mimic every television genre – but there is always some element of distortion to mark the ads off from the representation of reality; even ‘real people’ ads are hyperrealistic, not to be confused with ‘real’ testimonials. So, although ads have an enunciative stance of discourse, they are not taken at face value, but as fictive; the spatial representation in ads is also marked by a wide variety of dream techniques.

Besides the two extremes of hard-sell discursive ads and soft-sell whisper of product ads, there are a large range of ads with ‘mixed’ enunciative positions: the voice-of-science ads, the slice-of-life ads. Most interesting in terms of enunciative stance are those in which a narrator talks directly to the camera while the world around him or her remains oblivious to the discourse. Take, for example, an ad for a brand of mass-produced hamburger, narrated by a black child-celebrity. The child is in a condensation of the American dream, surrounded by signs of luxury – pool, rich clothing, a butler – but is telling the viewer about his ‘dream’ of a hamburger. Meanwhile the butler, oblivious to the viewer, brings the child an enormous hamburger. The child looks collusively at the viewer saying, ‘There are some compensations for fame!’ The chains of

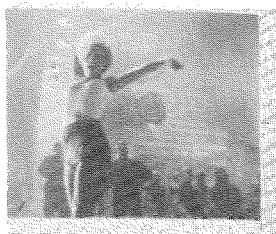
wishful thinking which created the child-star to begin with and then the ad are truly complex – what is interesting here is the servant, who not only obeys the television fiction of story space inhabitants – he is also a remnant of the social fiction that servants don't see or hear the discourse of those they serve. But such ads of mixed enunciation do not require celebrities or servants in these respective roles of narrator and inhabitant of the story space. For example, a restaurant owner stops in the middle of a crowded room filled with diners to address the implied viewer and endorse a product. None of the diners pays attention to the intrusion or gets aware of the viewer, who seems to be addressed across the tube in his/her own home.

Another very common characteristic of representation in TV ads is the zoom into an extreme close-up of the product: a hamburger, then, becomes in relative terms, gigantic; a flashlight battery begins to rotate after the zoom-in like a space station of considerable size. Other ads play with extreme variation in size – humans are often tiny in relation to a product – or in speed of delivery – either of image or of sound. Some of these techniques are meant to be playful and to draw attention to the ad – ads must be seductive to overcome our normal reaction of discrimination against them. But there is another aspect to the strategy of the zoom-in to a fantasy – the viewer is placed *within* story space. The 180° rule which would separate the viewer is also violated in all kinds of ways – through transformation of objects and through shots from a variety of illogical directions. It is usually the product through which the camera grants us access to the fantasy world of the ad. The old slogan 'Let Hertz put you in the driver's seat!' with its little man magically deposited in a car has been replaced by more sophisticated strategies for putting the viewer-camera position 'bodily' within a fictive story space. The ad which maximises the fantasy associated with a product is an invitation to break the boundary between 'reality' and fantasy.

The well-publicised Apple 'Macintosh' computer ad which appeared on US television during the 1984 Superbowl game is a topical representation of some of the fears and desires of the television viewer. The theme is a fantasy recreation of Orwell's *1984* – identically grey-washed prisoners march ploddingly past banks of monitors to seats in an auditorium with a huge TV-quality image of their leader, whose voice is over the entire scene. A woman athlete in red chased by hooded guards advances toward us – the home viewers – and is shown in a reverse shot preparing to hurl an axe. The implied viewer is eventually placed in the audience within the auditorium, then, the talking head of Big Brother is placed congruent with our own TV screen. The athlete's axe smashes through the screen with a liberating flash of light (almost as if our own screen were smashed), followed by awed looks of prisoners and the Apple logo and voice-over, 'So 1984 won't be like 1984!' The promise of liberation from Big Brother by the 'interactive' computer is by implication a liberation from television (rather than a repressive social system) countering at the same time the fears connected with domination by the computer itself. The ad promises a machine which breaks with the boundary which separ-



Advertisement: close-up on a surfer.



athlete (above) hurls axe at screen image of Big Brother (7).



ates us from each other and from the fantasies of the good life offered by our consumer society in advertising itself. The computer offers the fantasy of contact with another consciousness without responsibility—the screen broken. In television the screen remains in place, despite the various strategies for overcoming it by including the viewer in fictive discourse or within the reaches of a fantasy space. Let us assume that discourse as sociality is desired as well as feared: television offers the viewer a fictive sociality, a poor simulacrum of human exchange, but without its pitfalls or obligations.

II. TALK-BACK

Dear Abby: Is it characteristic of all old men to talk back to the TV? It is most upsetting because when my husband watches TV, it sounds like there are three people in the living room—when it's only him. . . . Abby, is my husband senile, or is this a form of insanity? Don't use our name. He is retired and everyone thinks he's normal—Talker's Wife

*Dear Wife: He may be perfectly all right, so unless you have other reasons to question your husband's well-being, don't worry about it. Thank your lucky stars you have a man who's alive, occupied and entertained. But it might be good for him to get out of the house and talk to some 'real' people occasionally.*²⁸

In a study for an article on 'Watching TV News as Para-Social Interaction', Mark R Levy found that a number of 'focused group members'

*said they occasionally responded to the newscaster's opening greeting (e.g. 'Good evening from NBC News in New York') with a friendly salutation of their own (e.g. 'Good evening, John'); and others recalled reacting to the anchorman's sign-off (e.g. 'Thanks so much for watching' or 'We'll have a complete update of the news at 11') with a reciprocating remark such as 'You're welcome' or 'See you later'.*²⁹

Certainly television invites such responses through its extensive use of discursive forms, especially direct address to the viewer. The actual verbalisation of a response is probably a small part of the sub-vocalisations which must take place in reaction to TV discourse—responses which may or may not contradict the ideological values of a particular show. It can be surmised that conditions of censorship and the intensity of the reaction to a particular statement might determine whether a vocal response occurs: a facade of utter silence is appropriate for the presence of strangers. Also, a positive response implies more involvement in the fantasy that the television is a conversational partner, while a negative response implies rejection of the fiction as well—often a response would be too impolite to be acceptable in a real two-way conversation. Certainly there are different degrees of belief connected with the viewer's response to discursive form, but it is unlikely that any represent true delusion or

²⁸ Taken from the 'Dear Abby' column by Abigail Van Buren, copyright 1983 Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

²⁹ *Journal of Broadcasting*, Winter 1979, vol no 1, p 72.

naïveté (like that of the fictional character in the cinema audience who tries to intervene in the film action).

Horton and Wohl, who developed the term 'para-social' interaction, contend that 'audience members react to mass media performers or the characters they portray *as if* the communicators or characters were part of the audience's peer group.'³⁰ Para-social interaction is somewhere in between the primary interaction one would have with 'real' people and secondary or instrumentally purposive interaction.

There is every reason to believe that 'talk-back' to the TV set/programme/character is part of a pattern of reaction to television as social imaginary – we know we are not being offered 'real' discourse, but nevertheless. . . . Television is our prisoner, a story-telling slave like Scheherazade, providing stories without pause and without demand for reciprocity. Where *dialogue* demands that we take the other seriously, that we take responsibility for our statements, that we accept the consequences of our statements in the world and most of all, that we are prepared to change our beliefs or at least our demands in response to the other, the discourse of television offers us a one-way confessional. Dialogue by definition requires linguistic equality, a turn-taking reciprocity. Television discourse allows us the *impression of subjectivity*, the fictive nature of which we are partly aware. Is unheard 'talk-back' our only form of interaction with television discourse as viewers? A closer look shows a more virulent cycle of feedback which makes television discourse less a confessing quasi-subject than a flattering courtier of the public.

US commercial television employs a ratings system which measures whether a programme is on or not in a representative number of households; demographic studies can also divide the public according to the amount of buying-power and the kinds of goods likely to be bought (according to class, age, sex, race or ethnic group, credit record, etc). The ratings tie the symbolic exchange of discourse to the economic exchange of commodities; the buying power of the audience rather than the quality of the programme is the prime-time factor in the production of television discourse; the equality of partners in discourse is no longer even a goal.

The result of our system is that television 'gratifies' our imputed desires and 'satisfies' our projected needs, but it does not offer us the challenge to our fantasies and self-conceptions of a consciousness which would truly address us as an other, 'I' to 'you'. Hence I would maintain that the forms of discourse in television, of mediation through the quasi-subject of the representatives of the medium itself, are of ideological and cultural importance.

Yet, the forms themselves are seductive, pleasurable:

People like to listen to stories, to believe what they're told, to imagine that the implacable forces of history speak to them with a human voice. Who can bear to live without myths. . . . The media thus play the part of a courtier, reassuring their patrons that the world conforms to the wish of the presiding majority. . . . By telling people what they assume they already know, the

*media reflect what society wants to think of itself. The images in the mirror compose the advertisement for reality.*³¹

But isn't there a desire for intersubjectivity not well met in other cultural forms, a welcome, admirable, even daring desire to exchange with another consciousness behind all this? Our relation to television can be summarised as one in which a medium structured to prevent dialogue with the other in our society has developed a fictional form of dialogue; television cannot satisfy our desire for subjectivity, but it can displace it. It caters to both our desire for mastery and pleasure in identification as well as our wish to share in subjectivity through recognising and being recognised by others as a 'you'.

³¹ Louis Lapham,
'Gilding the News'
Harper's, July 1981, p
37.

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ANECDOTAL TELEVISION

ANDREW TOLSON TELLS US THE ONE ABOUT ...

¹ John Caughie, 'Rhetoric, Pleasure and "Art Television"', *Screen* 1981, vol 22 no 4, p 14.

² More precisely, much psychoanalytic film theory finds its support in a phenomenological encounter with the text. The text is constructed as an object, in itself, for subjective recognition: a text with certain essential characteristics (contradiction, excess, 'flow' etc). Some presentations at the International Television Studies Conference, London, 1984, adopted or adapted this kind of psychoanalytic approach for TV. See, in particular, Beverle

AT THE PRESENT TIME, the question of television talk is a matter for immediate as well as intrinsic theoretical interest. For if television depends, to a much greater degree than cinema, on sound; and if a major proportion of that sound consists of talk – then an analysis of this area might contribute much to our understanding of the characteristic forms of TV. In this way, the interest in talk connects with a preoccupation of much recent work on television, which seeks to define its textual specificity. John Caughie relates this specificity to TV's history as a broadcasting medium: to its development from radio, and its affinities with popular theatre. Film, he argues, has a quite separate history: with origins in silent cinema, and a correspondingly complex system of visual rhetoric.¹ If this is the case, one wonders about the productivity of some attempts to import categories of film theory to the study of television texts: In particular, the psychoanalytic metadiscourse, with its focus on visual spectacle, identification, pleasure etc, may be simply missing the point.²

The proposition of this article is that some aspects of the television text can be better understood from a verbal, rather than a visual, standpoint. This is not to neglect the visual, nor is it to deny the productivity of recent work on television which comes from a film studies background. In particular, John Ellis' *Visible Fictions* has established a number of

central categories which can form the basis for further research.³ My suggestion here is simply that the 'logic' to some of these points remains unclear from the perspective of film theory, but can be demonstrated through a verbal discourse analysis.⁴ So I'll begin by referring to three key characteristics of television established in Ellis' analysis, and will proceed to investigate their possible rhetorical structure.

Elements of television

Two characteristics are relatively uncontroversial, but the third requires some discussion. Firstly then, a basic observation about television concerns the regular and repeated centrality of *direct address* (as opposed to its intermittent use in cinema – for certain particular effects). Secondly, following Ellis, it also seems well established that the narrative structure of television is relatively fragmented, or *segmented* (as opposed to the narrative continuity characteristic of film). Ellis goes on to suggest that the flow of segments, which often lacks narrative closure, is packaged by television in terms of distinctive generic formulae. So TV narratives are continuous, often open-ended (series, serials): both repetitive (in terms of situation), and familiar (in terms of characters, personalities etc).

Thirdly, however, when Ellis talks about the apparent 'liveness' of television, his argument requires, in my view, some further qualification. Certainly an insistence on liveness, immediacy and presence seems to be a feature of the TV image⁵; but in *Visible Fictions* this is formulated in terms of a general contrast with film – i.e. with the so-called 'photo-effect' of cinema, where the image appears recorded, consistent with an 'historic' mode of narration⁶. One difficulty here, it seems to me, is that a good deal of television (particularly in its documentary mode) also appears recorded; and moreover the recorded status of the documentary image is built into television's *regime*. Ellis is wrong, I think, when he asserts that TV makes a general and consistent attempt to 'disguise' the recorded image – to present it as 'live'. In some contexts, within certain genres (news, current affairs, various 'magazine' formats), it seems more appropriate to suggest that TV constructs a *hierarchy* of apparently live and apparently recorded images – a hierarchy in which 'liveness' takes precedence over 'recording'.

But this point raises a further general observation about the regime of television: that in a number of ways it can be seen to follow an explicit hierarchical order. Thus, not only do live images take precedence over recordings; but also direct address takes precedence over indirect address; and what goes on in a studio generally takes precedence over what happens in actuality. (By 'taking precedence' here I mean being in a position to interrupt, contextualise, quote, comment, speculate, etc). So that, in general terms, actuality (which may be recorded, and is usually framed in indirect address) is set up as a *pretext* for studio narration and comment (apparently live, and involving direct address).⁷

One useful way of describing this regime is in terms of a hierarchy of

Houston, 'Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption' (forthcoming from BFI Publications).

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³ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.

⁴ In this paper I leave open many questions around the use of the term 'discourse analysis'. My approach owes something to Foucault, a little to Anglo-American linguistics, but has been directly influenced by an interest in 'forms of communication' (rhetorics, techniques of representation) at Griffith University, Brisbane. See the work of Ian Hunter and Dugald Williamson cited in my report on the ASSA conference in this issue.

⁵ See, for further discussion of this point, contributions by Jane Feuer and Robert Stam, in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol 2, University Publications of America, 1983.

⁶ John Ellis, *op cit*, pp 58-9.

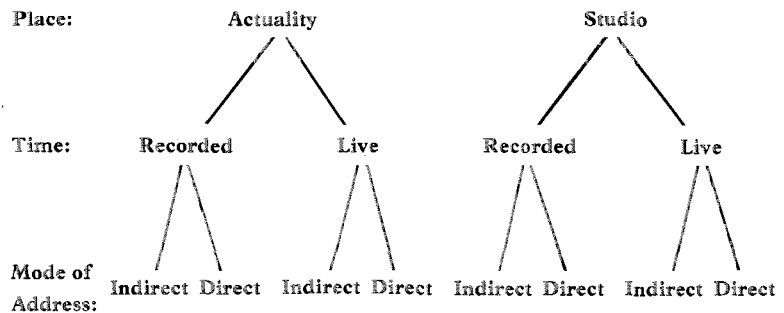
⁷ The function of studio comment and 'informed speculation' in the regime of TV News and Current Affairs is extensively discussed, in a number of papers, by Stuart Hall, Ian Connell and Lidia Curti. See, Stuart Hall et al, 'The "Unity" of Current Affairs Television', in Tony Bennett et al (eds), *Popular Television and Film*,

London, BFI, pp 88-117; and Ian Connell, 'Television News and the Social Contract', in Stuart Hall et al (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*, London, Hutchinson, 1981.

⁸ Margaret Morse, 'Talk, Talk, Talk: The Space of Discourse in Television News, Sportscasts, Talk-Shows and Advertising', in this issue.

⁹ The apparent exception to this principle, when studio talk is interrupted by live actuality (e.g. election results, public announcements, etc) is indeed the one that proves the rule. For the studio discourse delegates this power to the live occasion, which is institutionally marked in its exceptional significance.

spaces from which to speak. 'Space' is a concept introduced by Margaret Morse⁸, where again it is established in terms of a general distinction between TV and film. Thus, there are spaces for 'story' and spaces for 'discourse'—with TV (relative to cinema) foregrounding the latter. But if the story/discourse distinction can be recognised in particular texts (within modes of address, narration, etc), its forms of appearance can be further understood as specific condensations, combinations, of an ordering of 'spaces' in TV's discursive regime. This regime is structured, not simply at a textual, but more generally at an institutional, level: i.e. it is a televisual regime. On British broadcast television, a great deal of what appears as 'text' is constructed out of a combination of three spatial conventions, ranged in a hierarchical order. And this institutional ordering of spaces can be represented diagrammatically, as follows:



(The general rule is that spaces to the right/at the top of the hierarchy take precedence over those to the left/below.)⁹

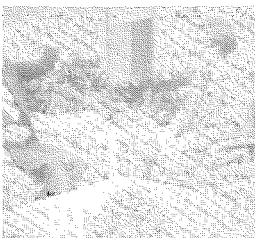
'Can I tell you another...?'

To return to the television text (bearing in mind, as I have suggested, the possibility that this structure might follow a verbal rather than a visual 'logic'), the question I want to pose is this: what is the logic of a text which is (a) segmented, (b) hierarchical and (c) regularly punctuated by direct address? One possible answer is suggested by the rhetorical structure of a form of talk which regularly appears on television, particularly in chat shows. In the following extract from *Wogan* (BBC-1, March 17, 1984), Bob Monkhouse (guest) is talking to Terry Wogan (host) about his experiences while hosting a live game show, *The Golden Shot*:

Wogan: Remember when you used to do *The Golden Shot* live? That was actually my first appearance on British television with you in *The Golden Shot*. Wasn't that a terrifying show to do?

Monkhouse: I think *The Golden Shot* helped me immensely because I had a kind of a glib or flip image on TV. But when I went out and did that

from a sequence in which Monkhouse (left) tells Terry Wogan (right) the one about *The Shot*....

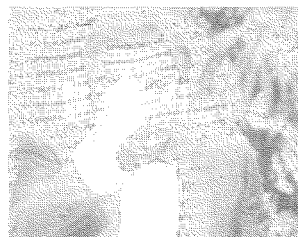
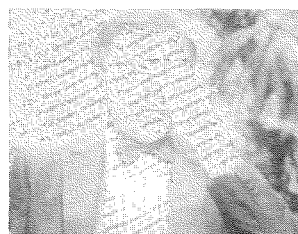
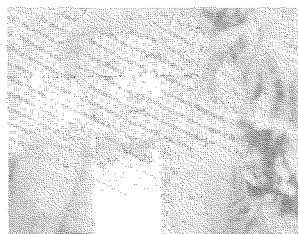


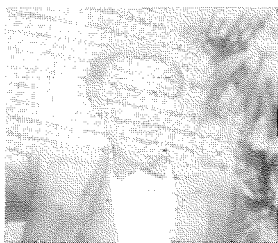
show with not just egg on my face, omelettes seen forming on my chin, we had incidents on that. . . . Did I ever tell you about the loony priest we had on *The Golden Shot*? Right, we moved up to Birmingham – I'm talking about years ago, 1968 – and this crazy priest starts writing in, Father Pollock. We didn't always refer to him as that – we found a variation on that. We found two variations, the kinder of which was Pillock. He starts writing in saying you shouldn't show weapons on television on a Sunday. 'The machinery of death,' he said, 'you should not show on television on a Sunday.' And he said he wanted to come to the studio and he wanted to be in the studio, I think to administer the last rites to someone who had been struck down by a bolt. So the producer at that time suffered fools more gladly than I did and the priest came. So this particular week, Father Pollock is sitting in the front row and, as you said, the show is live, it had to be. I should remind perhaps those who don't remember *The Golden Shot* that you had to see the image of a target on your television screen at home in order to say on the telephone. . . .

Wogan: 'Up a bit', 'down a bit' and all that.

Monkhouse: That's right, guide events in a television studio maybe 200 miles away. Great single idea for a show. Now, but once you've done that and qualified and exploded an apple you then came to the studio and now a woman comes to the studio who has qualified the previous week; she came from Kelvinside, Glasgow and she's got a patch over one eye. So I said: 'Is there something wrong with your left eye?' And she said: 'Why should there be something wrong with it? It's not there.' 'What do you mean it's not there? You had two eyes in the photograph you sent us when you applied to be a contestant.' She said: 'That was a glass eye; it's not currently in position. The socket is itchy, and I shall place it in position for the show.' So now and then she did that. So she's not only one-eyed, she's got a twitch. She's going to the free-standing crossbow which is the only one we had any danger to, and the priest is in the front row. We go on air and Father Pollock started praying, audibly, in Latin. Now the assistant floor manager's going over trying to stop him. But how do you stop a priest from praying? 'Mmmmmmm' – God knows whom he's praying for. And the woman with the patch and the twitch is out there at the free-standing crossbow and I'm ad-libbing the jokes: 'Well anything can happen today, we all make mistakes, that's why they put rubbers on the end of pencils.' She, poom. . . . She twitched at the moment she pulled the trigger. The bolt, or quarrel, spun off the metal frame to the target and went in, rebounded into, the audience. Guess who it hit? Here (points to forehead). So I've never believed in the power of prayer since then. He went out like a light.

Can I tell you another one very quickly? Because it's just come to mind. Because I was explaining to you that you had to see the image at home and say up a bit, right a bit and you remember that, OK, we were into about show 18 or something, still early days, and there's a guy on the 'phone and he's got to 'phone in and hit the apple – 'cause you're looking down the sight with this camera mounted on the crossbow. 'Erm,' he says, 'erm, roight a bit, roight a bit, stop, roight a bit, roight a bit, stop, roight a bit, roight a bit' and he's going way off the target. So, I said 'Just a second, just a second' I said, 'Stop the clock.' I can't hang up on the idiot because we're on live television, so I wanna go 'berk'. I said, 'You've left the target', and he says: 'Don't blame me, I told the man.' I said: 'What man?' He said: 'The man from Rumbelow's, he come and took the television set last Friday.' It's true,





there's more, there's more. I promise you there's more. This is live on TV, there's nothing I can do, the audience is going ha, ha, ha. I said: 'You mean you're sitting at home without a television set?' He said: 'I'm not; I'm not a fool, Bob, I'm in a call box.' 'If you're in a call box you haven't got a television set.' 'I can see the window of Curry's.' I said: 'It's Sunday afternoon, they're closed.' 'They leave the TV sets on in the window over the weekend. I can see you plain as day,' he said, 'Give us a wave.' So I went. . . . He said: 'You're not waving.' I said: 'I am waving.' He said: 'They've tuned it to the bloody BBC.' Marvellous moments.

Wogan: *Well I suppose we'll never see Monkhouse possibly the comedian on television again. We certainly haven't seen him tonight. When you want to do your act you tend to do it at clubs and at live gigs. It can't be for the money, I mean it's tough. Do you want to go for the masochism?*

Monkhouse: *How do I explain? What it means to me is very, very difficult. It isn't principally for the money although the tax man must be paid and . . .*

Wogan: *Is it fear?*

Monkhouse: *I love the fear. I love the stimulus of the . . .*

Wogan: *Eric Morecambe said that to me. He said 'It's fear.'*

Monkhouse: *Yes, Eric has identified that as the sort of prime motivating force. What makes you funny? It's fear. But what takes you out there is not fear. There must be something else. It's fear once you get out there yes, that makes you think fast, it makes you ad-lib. That makes you respond. But it's more than that, it's the sheer joy of actually being in a situation where you are the source of people's pleasure.*

Wogan: *Lovely, thank you Bob.*

The above is a particularly elaborate and skilful example of a popular rhetorical practice: the *anecdote*. But in this context it is interesting to observe that a familiar set of verbal conventions is accompanied by visual display, appropriate to a television performance. First then, I'll describe, briefly, the rhetorical structure and function of anecdotes as a form of talk. Following this, I'll return to some more general speculations about the 'logic' of the television text.

Anecdotal rhetoric

Anecdotes can be defined as incidental narratives which perform an illustrative or exemplary function. They are incidental in two senses: firstly, they are incidentally produced—i.e. more or less spontaneous, casual, habitual (Monkhouse: 'Can I tell you another?'); secondly, they are focused around a specific incident or event which defines the extent of the story. Rhetorically, in many kinds of speech, the tactic is to use such incidental narratives to exemplify some kind of general point—usually a *moral*, which may take the form of a maxim, aphorism or proverb: 'And it all goes to show . . .' etc (Monkhouse: 'So I've never believed in

the power of prayer since then'). Indeed, Wogan seems to be doubly emphasising this moral function of the anecdote by explicitly inviting Monkhouse's final reflection:

the sheer joy of actually being in a situation where you are the source of people's pleasure...

Do I detect an edit in the video tape at this point? Has the talk been re-constructed to produce a particularly 'fitting' conclusion?

Moving on from this definition of the anecdote, some observations can be made about its narrative structure. Firstly, as befits the moral tale, anecdotes have a *retrospective* focus. That is, the anecdotal incident is strictly framed in the past – there is no present or future to these stories, and no sense of an unexpected outcome. Often the outcome is already known, given away by the narrator (as in: 'Did I tell you the one about...?'), with the emphasis on how the inevitable occurred.¹⁰ At the most, as in these rather elaborate Monkhouse anecdotes, a kind of suspense is created by the *delay* of a predictable outcome – but there is no real uncertainty (the question 'Guess who it hit?' can easily be answered). The position of the listener then, is highly *secure* in this type of narrative.

But if the story is highly predictable, the pleasure of the anecdote seems to come from another source. A central feature of this narrative logic is its reliance, for effect, on dramatic re-enactment. Partly, this involves the re-telling of dialogue ('I said to her; She said to me'); and it is through simulated dialogue that the listener becomes involved in character recognition (the loony priest, the woman from Kelvinside). Character recognition is thus a central feature of anecdotes. Secondly however, and this is quite clear in the Monkhouse examples, the re-telling of dialogue can involve the narrator himself taking on different parts. For example: Monkhouse caricatures local accents and ways of speaking; his gestures supply props (the telephone and the eye-patch); and (I want to go on to make a major point out of this) Monkhouse's gaze shifts backwards and forwards – from direct address to Terry Wogan, to the indirect re-enactment of characters in the story (the best example is where Monkhouse plays the priest).

In short, in terms of gesture and shifting gaze, the anecdote has a visual dramatic structure which complements the verbal discourse; and which enables the narrator finally to turn to the listener, fixing him with direct address, as he delivers the moral of the story.

Televised anecdotes

I want to explore the possibility that this analysis of the structure of the anecdote might serve to illuminate a television text organised in terms of segmentation, spatial hierarchy and a play between modes of address. The analysis of television will work on two levels. Firstly, there is a question of what is accomplished by the telling of anecdotes on television –

¹⁰ There seem to be some similarities between the way anecdotes work and the narrative structure of soap opera, as discussed by Charlotte Brunsdon in 'Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera', *Screen* 1981, vol 22 no 4, (re-printed in *Regarding Television*). Cf: 'in the business not of creating narrative excitement, suspense, delay and resolution, but of constructing moral consensus...' etc.

¹¹ John Langer, 'Television's "Personality System"', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 3 no 4, 1981.

¹² *ibid*, p 361.

¹³ Three, if Langer's reference to characters in series and serials is to be included under the general heading of 'personality'. But perhaps the story/discourse distinction can be mobilised to clarify this point: i.e. stories have 'characters'; discourse produces 'personalities'.

and here I want to say something about the way chat shows work, in terms of what has been called television's 'personality system'¹¹. Secondly, however, the main part of the argument is a suggestion that an anecdotal effect might, to some extent, be built into the structure of TV's discursive regime: both within particular programme formats and in terms of the way many TV narratives are organised. Finally, this possibility, that television's *regime* is anecdotal, might account for some of its problematic pleasures.

On the first level, John Langer refers to 'congenial talk and (the) public offerings of personal anecdotes', as a central mechanism in the operation of TV's 'personality system'¹². However, there is an ambiguity in Langer's essay, which can, I think, be clarified by more detailed reference to the way anecdotes work. For Langer produces at least two definitions of the TV personality¹³: first, 'personality' as demonstrated in interviews, particularly of the 'chatty' kind where personal disclosure is involved; and second, 'personality' as an effect of TV's mode of presentation – its use of familiar figures who address the viewer directly. In terms of *Wogan* this issue is clear: for it is not only Monkhouse, who tells the anecdote, but also Terry himself, who qualifies as a 'TV personality'.

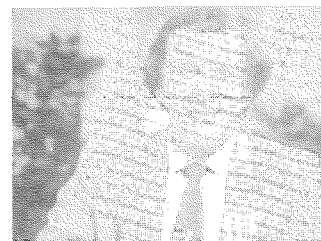
One way of resolving this ambiguity is to recognise that there are certain moves available to the host of a chat show, which are structurally similar to those open to his guests. These moves revolve around the key anecdotal technique of re-enactment – a technique which seems central, both to the way anecdotes are told, and to the way a 'personality effect' is created. Indeed, this technique seems to be increasingly exploited on *Wogan*, and in other kinds of popular television show. What was exceptional, even accidental, for *Parkinson* (though retrospectively memorable – cf. the much retold incidents with Miss Piggy and Rod Hull's Emu) has become a deliberate strategy in the BBC's current prime-time chat show.

We have noted that Monkhouse takes on several parts, in a way that involves self-caricature. However, many kinds of popular TV show (including variety and game shows, as well as chat) seem to offer opportunities for impromptu dramatics: for example, where personalities play silly games, charades, or out-of-character parts (a technique pioneered by Morecambe and Wise). Of course, on these kinds of show, guests are invariably given the opportunity to retrieve 'genuine' personalities (cf. game show valedictories, permitting direct address, greeted not by laughter but by applause). But the 'genuine' personality is validated, authenticated, by our knowledge that s/he is 'game for a laugh'. Much the same effect is produced by the telling of jokes, anecdotes, repartee, etc, in a chat show.

But in *Wogan* not only the guest, but also the host, is a 'TV personality'. In the first place the show exploits Terry's comic facility and his line in self-mockery (the carry-over from his former role as radio disc-jockey may be significant here). Secondly, however, the show also acknowledges a space (intermittent in *Parkinson*) for the re-call of previous chat, quotations from previous shows – so that we get chat about

chat, or 'metachat'. This space allows Terry's own part in that previous chat to be re-presented anecdotally (the goings-on with Victoria Principal, Sophia Loren, etc). But crucially, Terry's 'personality' does not just depend on the re-telling of anecdotes which include him. For an anecdotal effect is produced by this show whether or not anecdotes are actually *told*: it is produced by the show's form of presentation. It has, I think, to do with the fact that Terry is continually slipping in and out of character; out of, and back into, direct address.

At the end of each dialogue, Terry turns to face the camera and the studio audience applauds. Here it seems that the chat itself is re-presented to us as an exemplary performance, as a demonstration of 'personality': 'it all goes to show...' that the guests – and by extension Terry himself – are genuine human beings. To put it another way: an anecdotal effect is produced here, not only by what the man in the telephone booth said to Monkhouse on *The Golden Shot*, but also by what Bob said to Terry on *Wogan*. In both cases the dramatised dialogue is retrospectively defined as exemplary, as the narrator/host shifts out of character and turns to face the audience.



Wogan turns to the camera at the end of the dialogue.

Anecdotal television

Clearly, at this point, discussion has moved from the telling of anecdotes *on* television, to the possibility that an anecdotal effect might be produced *by* television, in its dominant form of presentation. My suggestion is that this effect is produced by TV's organisation of direct and indirect modes of address – more precisely, by the play between these modes of address; and that this constitutes one element in TV's hierarchical regime. It would be feasible, therefore, to go on to explore the extent to which this effect might be a characteristic of many forms of television, not only chat shows. In this final section, I want to indicate some instances of the way an anecdotal structure seems to be built into other televisual formats – ranging from the classic *This is Your Life*, through a perennial consumer oriented magazine show, *That's Life*, to some more speculative observations about television news.

This is Your Life has been described by David Frost (on *TV-AM*, the commercial early morning chat show) as the 'perfect format' for television. So familiar is this format that it can be very briefly summarised as: the construction of a guest biography, through a series of exemplary anecdotes, loosely assembled into the narrative of a 'life'. But the major point about this show (and why it is such 'good television') is that anecdotes are not simply *told* about the guest, or simply read by compere Eamonn Andrews from his script; rather, the anecdotes are dramatised, re-enacted, within the format of the programme. So a repeatedly great moment in *This is Your Life* occurs precisely at that moment in the structure of the anecdote where dialogue might be expected to occur ('You said to him'/'He said to you', etc). At that moment the dialogue is taken up by a mystery character off stage, while the camera (and thus the TV

viewer) studies the face of the guest for signs of recognition: ('Yes it's your friend who you haven't seen for 30 years...').

Two points can be made about this example. Firstly, it illustrates the use of anecdotal rhetoric, built into the format of a TV programme, to introduce a third party, a new character, at precisely the 'appropriate' moment (I'll return to this point). Secondly, however, it seems central to the effect of *This is Your Life* that the position of the viewer is ambivalent: both involved in the structure of each anecdote (guessing the identity of the mystery voice), and yet, to some extent, distanced from it (observing the reactions of the guest). The show invites us to watch as a subject is hailed and interpellated by the anecdotal discourse: it is a study in *recognition*, by which the guest is constructed as a 'personality'. Finally, this personality is located within a moral community (family, friends and colleagues) assembled on stage.

That's Life is also in the business of constructing a moral community. Several different kinds of item are contained in its 'magazine' format (vox pops, human interest stories, all kinds of quirky – frequently canine – performances). But again some observations can be made about its main focus, the consumer interest story, in terms of the structure of anecdote.

We might note, for instance, that when the programme takes up a complaint against an offending enterprise or authority, the consumer, as a rule, rarely 'speaks for herself'. Rather, the complaint is re-presented anecdotally, with the presenters – ranged in a spatial hierarchy in the studio – taking on the roles of respective parties to the dispute. Thus, what Mrs James said to the builder (18/3/84) is dramatised, in dialogue form, by two presenters; and when the programme, in the person of Esther Rantzen, confronts the offending agency, it takes the form of: 'What we said to him'/'What he said, or didn't say, to us'. Once again, the presenter appears as a 'personality', but more generally there is a way in which this way of telling, or re-telling stories appears distinctively 'televsual'. There are at least four elements in the format of *That's Life* which connect with previous observations on the 'specificity' of television:

- (a) a number of discrete items or incidents, retrospectively narrated;
- (b) a form of presentation which depends on a hierarchy of spaces – not only between studio and actuality, but also within the studio itself;
- (c) a structure which allows an opportunity for dialogue, at appropriate moments (and which is based upon the recognition of character);
- (d) a structure which encourages moral consensus – which in some cases explicitly takes the form of a maxim addressed to the viewer: 'Don't let it happen to you...'.

But my conclusion is that this structure is more than an occasional resource for television. My suggestion is that the anecdotal effect may be a general rhetorical strategy – found equally in TV News, Sports, Current Affairs, Advertising, as well as in varieties of chat show. It is a suggestion made speculatively, but it follows from a particular research interest – namely, the ways *interviews* are used on TV. Television news for example, is routinely organised in terms of the re-telling of a series of

incidental stories. It is a feature of these stories that they have systematic recourse to interview, at precisely what appear to be 'appropriate' moments. News interviews are brief—often no more than a couple of statements—and filmed in indirect address, or 'profile'.¹⁴ Subsequently, these statements are contextualised within a narrative spoken directly to the viewer by a reporter (who is not necessarily visible—direct address, as in radio, does not *depend* on looking). But the effect of the structure is to set up a relationship, in the news story, between two sets of enunciative positions: first, 'what he said to me', when I interviewed him; and second, 'what I now say to you', as I address you directly. Finally, 'what I say to you' is relayed up through TV's spatial hierarchy, as the news story is subjected to studio speculation from pundits, correspondents, and sometimes newscasters themselves.¹⁵

Could the use of interview, within the news story, be identified as an anecdotal practice? In this way, one could point to a particular rhetoric in television news: the re-telling of a series of incidental narratives; involving the dramatisation of character through dialogue (hence the use of interview); and permitting the use of stories as exemplary points of reference for subsequent moral speculation. Such a rhetorical analysis would connect with some general observations about the news: i.e. that it revolves around the construction of a 'community' (nation, region), populated by 'characters' (who act) and 'personalities' (who mediate the action). Within this community all the events, incidents, tragedies and scandals that take place, seem to add up to a statement about 'life'. 'There they go again,' we say, 'it only goes to show.'

This paper was first presented at the National Conference of the Australian Screen Studies Association, Brisbane, December 1984. I am grateful to Connie Balides for many helpful suggestions in its preparation.

¹⁴ See Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television, a World in Action', *Screen* Summer 1977, vol 18 no 2, p 46. Also, Ian Connell's discussion of conventions of the television interview in 'Monopoly Capitalism and the Media', in Sally Hibbin (ed), *Politics, Ideology and the State*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1978.

¹⁵ cf Ian Connell, 'Television News and the Social Contract', *op cit.*

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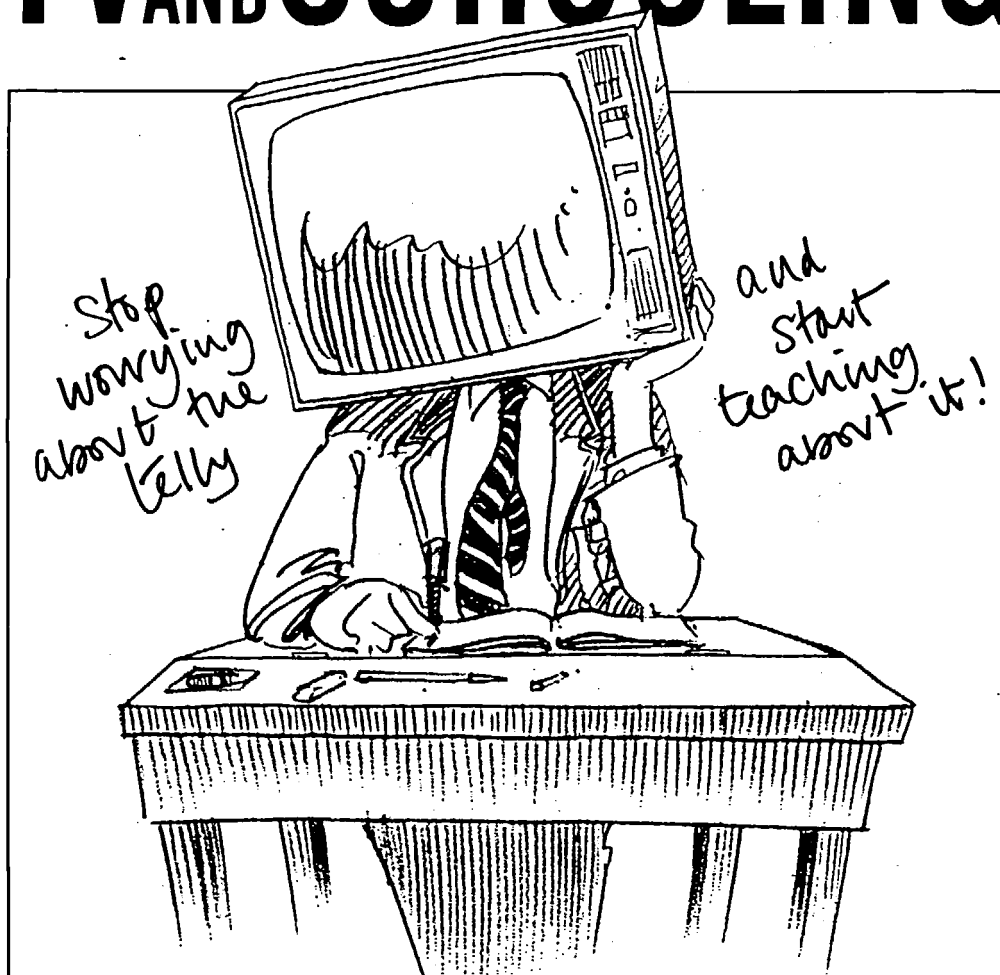
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SITUATION AND SIMULATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO
'I LOVE LUCY'
BY PATRICIA MELLENCAMP

¹ Jeanne Allen, 'The Social Matrix of Television Invention in the United States', in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol 2, University Publications of America, 1983, pp 109-119. This essay draws its primary source materials from trade periodicals.

LIKE ALL INSTITUTIONS and technologies, the now dominant practices of television were not 'determined' by technique or sudden 'intervention'. There is no ontology that necessitated a system of little, speaking light boxes in private homes beaming in transmissions from towers relaying signals from, in the US, three commercially central networks. Economics rather than essence sold us domestic receivers and built a monopolistic (until recently) distribution system.

However, as imagined and advertised in the 1930s, television was a many sided machine: 1) radio movies to be shown on large screens in public theatres; 2) educator and advertiser for businesses and schools; 3) surveillance or 'monitoring' devices for worker efficiency and military installations; and 4) two-way communication, developed by the telecommunications giant AT&T and enthusiastically endorsed by ham radio operators/amateurs. 'Ham television' had 'do it yourself' kits available for 300 dollars and 28 transmitters operative in 1934, eventually banned in the interests of 'excellence' and to 'protect' the consumer.¹

Visual telephones waited for a future which has now arrived (although limited in TV commercials to business conferences rather than house-to-house encounters, a campaign suggesting many interpretations, perhaps the most significant being the breakup of the AT&T monopoly; another being the intimate risk of personal, talk-with-now-TV). Large-screen theatrical presentation (a system initially favoured then fought by film studios) has been essentially limited to closed-circuit sports coverage, although for no 'logical' reason other than television's historical linkages with boxing then wrestling. Surveillance cameras are omnipresent, capturing criminals or shoppers in instant or frozen replays as memory tapes of customers wandering through stores, museums, and banks – all repositories of capital which TV protects.

Whatever its future, television – linked to (and in the case of CBS and NBC, owned by) the major radio networks in the US – recycled radio's stars, formats, times (and its primary concern with distribution and

² Harry Castleman and Walter J Podrazik, *Watching Television*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1982. This book was an invaluable source of information on the early years of television, filled with scheduling graphs and good anecdotes.

receivers) through little, prosceniumed screens throughout its massive increase in scheduled hours from 1944 to 1951. For example, in 1948, Lucille Ball starred in a radio comedy, *My Favorite Husband*, a direct precursor of her TV series. *At Home With Tex and Jinx* (1947) was an early version of Barbara Walters' (and others') celebrity interview-at-home shows. *Faraway Hall* (1946) was an unsuccessful (because unpopular) progenitor of the acclaimed 1980s prime-time soaps.² Vaudeville and movies fed both domestic media, each reliant on sound, and each influential in the rapidly developing suburbs. With a collage of quiz, news, music, variety, comedy, fashion/cooking shows, and commercials, both media were relatively irreverent toward narrative and worshipful of audiences – condition and measure of TV whether present, absent, or simulated. TV as a waste of time is indeed a misnomer. It has always been an ecology (a repetition and recycling through years) and a family affair; in the 1950s conducted collectively in the living room, sometimes with neighbours. A TV set was a status symbol, futuristically emblazoned by an antenna on the rooftop, a tuned-in economic declaration and neighbourly invitation.

Apparent in the early 1950s was the 'gender base' of television, with sport and news shows for men, cooking and fashion shows for women, and 'kidvid' for children. However, while acknowledging women's existence and work, US television scheduled few daytime programmes for women. As Jack Gould, the TV critic for the *New York Times* wrote: 'The idea of a nation of housewives sitting mute before the video screen when they should be tidying up the premises or preparing the formula is not something to be grasped hurriedly.' (Neither can the social ramifications of Gould's words and the 1950s be grasped hurriedly.) Equally, the networks battled in the best capitalist tradition, ironically over airwaves that 'belonged to the people', with formats – NBC wagering variety or 'vaudeo', culminating in *The Texaco Star Theatre* and the Berle travesties in 1948, and CBS betting on situation comedy, a thirty-year strategy.

This article circles around an initial CBS triumph in this economic ratings game: the 179 half-hour *I Love Lucy* programmes – 24½ minutes of programme and two minutes of opening and closing credits – which were broadcast from October 15, 1951 until May 6, 1957. Intersecting this series are theoretical texts: Jean Baudrillard's provocative *Simulations* and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* . . . , Hayden White's critique of history and narrativity and fragments from Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault – smatterings of 'great systems' appropriated for my purposes.

I.

As White argues, in its contemporary writing, narrativity – the reciprocity of fact and fiction – is both the ground of the 'real' identified as truth, and the measure of a proper, correct historiography:

... the very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern

³ Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), p. 10. Although not directly alluded to, White uses enough terms to indicate that his essay was strongly influenced by Foucault and Lacan. For example, on pages 23 and 24 he writes: 'The history then, belongs to the category of what might be called the "discourse of the real", as against the "discourse of the imaginary" or the "discourse of desire"'. The formulations are Lacanian, obviously, but I do not wish to push the Lacanian aspects of it too far.'

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 17.

*discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity.*³

In a collapse of the real and the imaginary – a 'simulation' – discourses of 'truth and the real' move through the fullness of narrative, cause-effect chronology to a resolute closure, without gaps or discontinuities. There is something at stake in this strategy and, of course, it is related to power and authority. White writes: 'The need or impulse to rank events with respect to their significance for the culture or group that is writing its own history . . . makes a narrative representation of real events possible.'⁴ The possibility of narrative realised by a culture's need to rank events, including women's place within this ranking, and hierarchise media into high/low categories, suggests the political determinism of not only contemporary histories and television criticism, but of narrative – in situation comedy only the merest overlay, perhaps an excuse. 'More plot than a variety show and not as much as a wrestling match', as comedian George Burns once described it. Yet, this implausible, sparse 'situation' (usually an exaggeration) exemplifies in its spare, obsessive repetition of the domestic regime, of marital bliss as crazy 'scenes' and competitive squabbles, a social plaint if not a politics.

On a recognisable par with minimal, artificial narratives are stereotypes – for most critics, situation comedy's second major 'limitation'. Fred is cheap, Ethel eats too much, Ricky loses his temper, and Lucy plots and shops. Fred, like Harry Morton and George Burns, is the 1950s expert on female psychology, the typical 'hen-pecked' husband, with constant commentary on women and marriage. In 'Oil Wells' (February 15, 1954), he labels Lucy and Ethel 'the snooper patrol', followed by 'Nosiness is just part of a woman's charm, like hangin' stockings in the bathroom and nagging.' In the famous 'Job Switching', Fred divides the world sexually into 'earners and spenders'. Ethel gets almost equal time for her 'men' jokes. At least TV, unlike the movies of the period, presumed that women occupied other subject positions, with different (albeit ghoulishly 'formulaic and tidy') identifications possible.

Taking a cue from Hegel, White argues narrative's relation to a legal system, 'legitimacy, or more generally, *authority*'.⁵ Situation comedy, replete with 'gaps' of performance and discontinuities – for example, Gracie Burns' inevitable one word after another of language, shifting the story, making it up along the way, bewildering characters – *uses* narrative, offhandedly. The hermeneutic code is not replete with expectation, in need of decipherment, ensnaring us, lying to us. That is what the characters say and do, the dominance of the proairetic. Comic comparison and expectation of pleasurable performance, rather than narrative suspense, are currencies of audience exchange. Perhaps this system might slightly challenge, as comedy in general does, 'narrative's relation to a legal system'; certainly narrative is not viewed as authoritative; it is necessary but not equal to performance. Thus, solo performance usually defines character and determines the 'star', often cast as a performer in a doubled

redundancy. Ironically, Lucy, the best and constant 'performer', is disguised as a housewife.

With White's 'ranking of events for the group writing its own history' in mind, I want to re-examine the repeated 'myth' and its interpretation of the 'origin' of *I Love Lucy*. As the story goes, this 'revolutionary' means of filming involved the simultaneous use of three 35mm cameras with ten-minute magazines (the discontinuous, stop and start method) for a live audience. One can only believe they were 'live' and thus laughing – laughter as sign of life and closure for comedy – and wonder what happens to this notion with reruns, through 30 years of *Lucy* history ('Initially filmed before a live audience, long since dead?'). The system was predicated on minimal sets, limited movement and uniform lighting – 'invented' by the German Expressionist cameraman, Karl Freund, and encouraged by businessman Desi Arnaz, the man behind the show, the empire, and – in some versions – the woman. Prior to this, most situation comedies had been shot live in New York, or, like *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, with two cameras, without an audience. (Later, as publicity created a 'real' – a laughing audience – the programmes were shown to an audience and their laughter recorded.) Desi Arnaz's method was and continues to be hailed as a technological (thus 'artistic?') rather than economic innovation; and, indeed, it set the pattern of three cameras and a 'live audience' for situation comedy.

In addition to the historical flaws of this myth, other readings are possible about the 'effects' of this format of production. Unlike the owners of other series (*Mr. Peepers*, *Menasha the Magnificent*, *That Wonderful Guy*, with Jack Lemmon, and *The Hank McCune Show*), Ball and Arnaz supposedly believed so strongly in their show and marriage that they took a salary cut in exchange for joint property rights and presto, unexpected by all, residuals and reruns were born. Under the rubric 'Desilu' (the couple's names linked together, with Desi's first/the stamp of corporate ownership/the name of their ranch in the 'valley'/and, eventually, a large studio), they had a tangible product which could be corrected by post-production editing, unlike 'live' broadcasts or the low resolution of kinescopes. And unlike the two-camera set-up without an audience, this system seemed to encode 'presence'. Close analysis suggests that one camera was essentially riveted to Lucy, on machine-gun alert for one of her famous 'reaction' shots – 'foiled again, light bulb, and spider'⁶ were written into the scripts. Or at least stories about production said there was an audience; there were never any reverse shots (no visual evidence, only off-frame-stage audio laughter, both diegetic and non-) and thus, 'performance' as real, as true, elided through fiction as White suggested, could be perpetuated and Lucy's genius believed and applauded. The risk of live TV was a simulation, already a 'hyperreal' of collective presence.

Perhaps most importantly, the standardisation of product and broadcast times was achieved. The system was economically brilliant – according to industrial practices of standardisation and specialisation, including private, soon to be corporate, ownership of the product – but artistically

⁶ Bart Andrews, *Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel*, New York, E P Dutton and Co, 1976, p 121. This invaluable source book includes a concluding synopsis of shows by air date and title without which I could not have historically organised my textual analyses; it was also used for anecdotes.

retrograde, a profitable hybrid of nineteenth century staging techniques and B movies' continuity style and abbreviated conventions, necessitating, for example, the centre-frame, frontal, uniformly lighted and limited *mise-en-scène* and conversational/reactive editing.

A parallel reading would cast Desi Arnaz as the fighting independent producer, doing battle with the network bosses who opposed filmed products fearing competition and the loss of their affiliated stations. However, TV's appetite could devour numerous hours with no threat to their coastal, lettered, and licensed dominance. Desilu went on to make hundreds of hours of programming, employing the same system in their own studio empire purchased with the profits from the first series. The three-camera format has become an institutionalised, familiar discourse.

There is another interpretation of this method of 'filming' situation comedy: of power as an apparatus, a machinery of narrative and 'style' which nobody sees; of power as a productive force:

*What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply . . . that . . . it does not simply weigh like a force which says no, but that it runs through and it produces things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be considered as a productive network.*⁷

Foucault's definition of power might be elided with 'mass culture'—a process, a collection of discourses, scenes, recycled from various media and cleverly contextualised within historical moments and genres. Thus, 'watching TV'—an illegitimate, indiscrete pastime—has replaced the generality of 'going to the movies', the cliché revealing whatever media is currently held in contempt. Easily attainable, televised pleasure 'forms knowledge and produces discourse'; it 'must be considered as a productive network.'

Within US situation comedy our expectation of repetition of shots, angles, *mise-en-scène* of bedrooms, frame left, kitchens, frame right, and the centrally placed, nondescript but middle-class living room (Burns and Allen had an upstairs bedroom), to say nothing of plots, comic bits, and bland, neat-and-clean versions of the prosperous family, continue from *Lucy* through *The Dick Van Dyke Show* into *Three's Company*. This almost literal return of the same is not insignificant, but a source of pleasure, and thus under siege as 'formula'. Out of the formulaic we must forge a politics of pleasure, one that includes women.

The sources of pleasure are often contemptible targets for critics of mass media and 'art'. This pleasure can border on the illicit, what Barthes at one point strangely labels 'stupidity':

*'stupidity is a hard and indivisible kernel, a primitive: no way of decomposing it scientifically (if a scientific analysis of stupidity were possible, TV would entirely collapse). What is it? A spectacle, an aesthetic fiction, perhaps a hallucination? Perhaps we want to put ourselves into the picture? It's lovely, it takes your breath away . . . it fascinates me.'*⁸

Fascination or aesthetic fictions appear to be bad or breathless for us.

⁷ Michel Foucault, in Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (eds), 'Dossier', *Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney, Australia: Feral Publications, 1980, p. 36.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (trans. Richard Howard), New York, Hill & Wang, 1977, p. 51. This 'fragment' is entitled 'About Stupidity'.

Fascination makes Barthes uneasy. Baudrillard will take fascination, oppose it to meaning, and construct a concept of the unmanipulated masses in relation to simulation and imagined scenarios of power.

II.

In opposition to the arguments of Foucault, the socialist utopias of collectivite access to the media (a redistribution of media/power advocated by, for example Hans Enzensberger, and media jeremiads of the Frankfurt School) and in complete alignment with the theories of Walter Benjamin and partially, Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard declared the end of the panoptic system in *Simulations*: 'The eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency.'⁹ For Baudrillard—using scientific concepts such as nuclear, astronomic and genetic as metaphors, hypotheses apparently generated by an encompassing model of a televised world which has eliminated the 'social'—the panoptic apparatus of surveillance has changed to a system of deterrence, where the 'distinction between active and passive is abolished... where the real is confused with the model... since *you* are always already on the other side. No more subject, focal point, center or periphery... no more violence or surveillance, only "information"... and simulacra of spaces.'¹⁰

'The space of simulation confuses the real with the model.'¹¹ This is the imaginary as everything, Baudrillard's 'hyperreal' in which all is model, statistic, memory bank and miniature which abolished representation—perspectival and specular space. Our images mask nothing, and thus it is dangerous to unmask them. Scandals such as Watergate are uncovered and condemned only to conceal the loss of the real of politics, truth and honour; Disneyland is a grand scheme concealing the fact that the entire US is Disneyland (a TV critic cleverly said that the only job Walt Disney would qualify for today would be President). We have moved from appearance, an age of truth and secrecy, to an age of simulacra, by strategies of deterrence rejuvenating a fiction of the real. Thus, we prove the real by the imaginary and the truth by scandal; we prove the law by transgression. Bank tapes identified Patty Hearst as a gun-toting robber; TV protected us in this 'simulation of revolution' from capital gone momentarily delinquent with desire. As Baudrillard says, we understand scandals of desire and crisis; the Hearst scenario had both. More disturbing is his argument that the simulation is more threatening than the 'real'; it revealed, in that instance, the absence or demise of radical action. Vietnam, a television war, is now being tried or verbally fought in the US courts. In its defense against General Westmoreland, CBS is uncovering the 'real' of written war documents. In this ironic inversion, television is *writing* a history of Vietnam. For Baudrillard, simulation is infinitely more dangerous than an actual crime 'since it always suggests... that law and order themselves might really be nothing more than simulations'.¹²

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (trans Paul Foss, Paul Patton, Philip Baitchman), New York, Semiotexte, 1983, p 52.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 53.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities Or the End of the Social* (trans Paul Foss, Paul Patton, John Johnston), New York, Semiotexte, 1983, p 84. For a further explication and critique of Baudrillard's bleak cultural forecast and fear of loss of mastery, see Patricia Mellencamp, 'Seeing Is Believing', forthcoming in *Theatre Journal*, May 1985, Johns Hopkins.

¹² Baudrillard, *Simulations*, *op cit*, p 36; p 38.

¹³ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, op cit, p 14.

¹⁴ *ibid*, pp 99-100.

¹⁵ David Marc, 'Understanding Television', *Atlantic*, August 1985, vol 254, no 2, p 35.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, op cit, p 36.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p 39.

¹⁸ *ibid*.

Baudrillard conceptualises the masses as a force of negativity, of silence. 'Power manipulates nothing, the masses are neither misled nor mystified.'¹³ He writes of communication:

*The myth exists but one must guard against thinking that people believe in it. That is the trap of critical thought which can only be exercised given the naivete and the stupidity of the masses as a presupposition. The mass media destroy the social, with its pressure of information. . . . However, the masses refuse to participate in the recommended ideals . . . and silence is the ultimate weapon. . . .*¹⁴

Perhaps the advertisers really do believe their messages, just as the newscasters believe they are 'transmitting' knowledge. Yet this assumption of power's discursive strategies by television's producers is a pretence which the recipients don't buy. Thus, TV is 'watched' by sceptics measured by statistics, and mistakenly construed by performers and scholars alike as manipulated, involved, and effected. As David Marc recently wrote: 'The distinction between taking television on one's own terms and taking it the way it presents itself is of critical importance.'¹⁵ In Baudrillard's pessimistic description, the silent majority, stronger than any medium, overshadow historical systems of power; they want fascination and pleasure rather than meaning: 'For it is not meaning or the increase of meaning which gives tremendous pleasure, but its neutralisation which fascinates . . .'¹⁶ Thus, he privileges wit, Freud's joke – a derailment of 'meaning' – as a pure example of pleasure. We don't need Freud to reveal that television is very funny, depending on where you're sitting.

With these provocative and tantalising assertions – which appear to 'explain' the importance of trivia and the equation of gossip with 'hard' news – and against the grain of traditional notions of 'the masses', whether glorified as the proletariat or decried as the 'unwashed', Baudrillard suggests that withdrawal into the private by ordinary people in their desire for fascination rather than 'meaning' might not be the insignificant side of history (as modern and particularly postmodern critics as well as classical scholars have insisted) but a direct defiance of the political, a form of actively resisting political manipulation: 'a staggering hypothesis'¹⁷. The private, the ordinary, the insignificant, the pleasurable would not be 'this side of representation but beyond it'¹⁸.

Yet TV pretends that an 'audience' – as measured and imagined by polls and now 'demographics' – is watching and listening to programmes and absorbing massive if not fatal doses of 'information' and entertainment. The ratings are a game in which millions of people are graphed, in an extraordinary equation, over millions of dollars. How much is a body worth? The networks know. TV in its present, privatised fashion, is not an all-seeing gaze from a central tower. However, networks – transmitters from horizon to horizon, beaming signals through the airwaves from studios in New York and Los Angeles, linked by coaxial cables – do resemble the spider's web of the panopticon. Furthermore, in the cells of

our houses, we cannot see the other prisoners, our neighbours; we can only imagine we are collectively seeing the central tower, which pretends it is seeing us. No disavowal here; only outright pretence, simulation.

Disavowal, that spectatorial mechanism for film—a psychoanalytic interpretation predicated on woman's infamous 'lack'—hardly seems applicable to television. This was the response mechanism predicted for the day after *The Day After*. Families in the United States were warned to watch the programme together, on civil disavowal ready alert. But of course, the terrifying effects didn't happen. No one even had to suggest, 'It's only a TV movie and Kansas was not destroyed.' (After all, Dorothy, the wicked witch is dead. Who believes in Oz any more?) Simulation, the hyperreal, precludes disavowal, which it might already be, and challenges the earlier 'suspension of disbelief'. Perhaps 'simulation' is historical.

Yet, in the 1950s, the sophisticated scepticism toward the real of TV was perhaps not so theoretical, or trivially pursued. The Korean War had fuelled the conspiracy theory as well as the moralists: the struggle was dramatised as the apocalypse, a battle between good and evil, democracy versus communism. Adversaries, largely invisible, were immoral and everywhere; the threat was nuclear war, yet with a fallout which we could avoid by hiding under our classroom desks or retreating to the basement. Paranoia was a more devastating fallout as the blacklist was viciously enacted. At the beginning of the decade, the proceedings of the Kefauver committee, investigating organised crime, were televised by WPIX in New York; the networks carried these 'real life' dramas with good ratings. Crime (including 'juvenile' delinquency) was thought to be rampant, but Congress, aided by TV, could help. Teenagers and sex were imagined to be on the rampage; the family and its 'values' were weakened and under siege. In April, 1951, McArthur's speech to Congress was broadcast. His words attacked the 'containment' and limited warfare policies of the Truman administration, revving up the conspiracy theory interpretation of not only world but social events. In July, 1952, the Republican convention was broadcast; Stevenson and Eisenhower fought part of the campaign on TV. The televised Army-McCarthy hearings began on April 22, 1954; the US watched, just as they had at the beginning of the decade the UN debates. Then, in 1959, it was revealed that TV quiz shows were rigged. The 'real', 'truth', was not only split off from TV, but simulation was equated with scandal; Charles Van Doren, the intellectual scholar, the 'glamorous egghead' and clean-cut American fellow, confessed, after initial lies, that he had been coached, that he performed, that he was given the answers: 'Everything was rigged.'¹⁹ Congress investigated, preachers gasped, newspapers expressed outrage; audiences seemed nonplussed, suggesting that in the 1950s simulation was more literal.

¹⁹ Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade and After: America, 1945-1960*, New York, Vintage Books, 1956.

III.

For Hayden White, narrative and identity are bound together as poles of power, linked to the inevitability of historical discourse, its move toward closure. This inevitability makes the 'real into an object of desire, and does so by its imposition upon events that are represented as real, of the formal coherency that stories possess'.²⁰ The urgent collapse of the 'real' of the personal into the fiction of television is an intriguing aspect of *Lucy and Burns and Allen*. Thus, Lucille Ball, movie star, and Desi Arnaz, Cuban bandleader, became Lucy and Ricky Ricardo; their 'friends' appear on programmes as bit players or 'themselves' as stars, e.g. John Wayne, Richard Widmark, William Holden, Cornel Wilde. During the Hollywood episodes in the series, Lucy imitates stereotypes of movie stars – wearing dark glasses, scarves, carrying long cigarette holders and strutting dramatically. She sits on drugstore stools waiting to be discovered and tells stories about instant stardom. Like the audience, she is star-struck, the consummate fan who will do anything to get star mementos, including a huge block of cement from Grauman's with John Wayne's footprints in it. Throughout these encounters, Lucy upstages, outperforms and out-reacts everyone.

In an episode titled, 'Harpo Marx', Harpo, dressed in his baggy coat and fright wig, playing his harp, chasing women and not speaking, enacts the reverse of the famous Groucho mirror scene from *Duck Soup* with Lucy dressed as and mimicking Harpo. At the end, the voice-over announcer says: 'Harpo Marx played himself.' Image/person/star are totally merged as 'himself,' the 'real' is a replayed image, a scene, a simulation – the hyperreal. The entire series has been biographically linked to the Arnaz marriage. But the most extraordinary or bizarre example of the elision of 'fact' and fiction, or the 'real' with the simulation, martialled by the 'formal coherency' of narrative, was Lucy's hyperreal pregnancy.

In 1952, with scripts supervised by a minister, a priest, and, you guessed it, a rabbi, seven episodes were devoted to Lucy's pregnancy (without ever mentioning the word). The first was aired on December 8, timed with Lucy's scheduled caesarean delivery date, Monday, January 19, 1953. Lucy's real, nine-month baby, Desi Jr, was simulated in a seven-week TV gestation, and electronically delivered on January 19 at 8 pm as Little Ricky, while 44 million Americans watched. (Only 29 million tuned in to Eisenhower's inaugural that month. We liked Ike. We loved Lucy.) The episode was titled, as in all the series' children's book titles, 'Lucy Goes to the Hospital'.

Of course, George Burns as George Burns played an entertainer on a TV show, as did Gracie; both talked about the show, both were recognised by strangers; and in 1955, their son Ronnie, a student at the University of Southern California, joined the programme as, of course, a student at the University of Southern California. Burns and Allen – character, person, star, actor, and indeed, icon – were all collapsed into a singularity – an act, a marriage, a set of conventions, a couple, a pro-

gramme, a family, show business, a way of life, a viewing habit, a private and a public sameness.

Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, one of the first 'I/Me/Mine' situation comedies on radio, the source of so many TV situations, played bandleader and singer/wife, the work/home formula. When they jumped to TV, their professions (and, in fact, all work) were dropped while David and Ricky, their teenage sons, were added as, right on, David and Ricky. This formula of the bland, affluent, white upper-middle class, problem- and work-free family, characterless if not boring, of the '50s and '60s dominated many of our memories, in strange intersection with the domestic viewing 'scene'. As Baudrillard writes: "'tabloid" trivia... has evolved into a total system of mythological interpretation, a closed system of models... from which no event escapes.'²¹ Held within myth, structured by narrativity, and modelled within history as a rerun of nostalgia, the real is a fiction confused with the model.

Outside the series (now I will conflate the 'real' with fiction), Desilu purchased RKO, Lucy's former studio. In addition to their seven acre, nine stage lot purchased in 1953, they now owned RKO's fifteen stage, fourteen acre Hollywood lot as well as RKO's Culver City Studio of eleven stages. Desilu was bigger than MGM or Fox. Along this corporate way, they 'tied in' with the American Export Lines in return for a plug on the European voyage episodes, and with General Motors for a car promotion on the California trip. The lucrative sponsorship/linkage with Phillip Morris is apparent in almost every episode; Lucy and Ricky constantly smoke. In the famous 'Lucy Makes a TV Commercial', Lucy imitates the Phillip Morris boy in her TV set which she has trashed. In the best Walt Disney fashion, hundreds of Lucy products were manufactured: Lucy and Little Ricky dolls, Lucy bedroom suites, Lucille Ball dresses, Desi Arnaz smoking jackets, he and she pyjamas, Desi Denims, Lucy Lingerie; there was a syndicated comic strip from 1952 to 1955, records, Dell comic books, and *I Love Lucy* one-act plays for amateur theatrical groups. Lucy and Desi's programme and products dramatise the oldest Hollywood tale: the inadvertent and applauded rise to fame and fortune. The 'trades' so often alluded to in the episodes were full of stories about Desilu; the guest stars which Lucy so crazily adored strove to meet were reported in the fan magazines as their friends. Indeed, fact and fiction were so cleverly matched as to be inextricable.

Their material 'rise', labelled in the 1950s 'upward mobility', is also apparent in the series. For the 27 episodes devoted to the California sojourn (where the show already originated, while claiming New York as its setting), aired during the 1955-56 season, Ricky buys a car (for all the bad women driver jokes that the series had so far avoided). Two episodes are devoted to the purchase.

By now the couples, constantly together, are mobile. In the Hollywood episodes, they stay in a luxurious hotel suite. In May 1956, 'Lucy Goes to Monte Carlo' (and makes, then loses, lots of money), and, after seventeen episodes devoted to Europe, returns to New York carrying her cheese 'baby' on the plane. In November, 1956, they're 'Off to Florida',

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'Requiem for the Media', *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (trans Charles Levin), St. Louis, Mo, Telos Press, 1981, p 175.

²² Roland Barthes, 'Change the Object Itself', in Stephen Heath (ed), *Image/Music/Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, p 167.

and 'Deep Sea Fishing' (with a bet between women and men, wives versus husbands, over who will catch the biggest tuna). In December that year, 'The Ricardos Visit Cuba'. Finally, the ultimate 1950s mobility—the move to Connecticut, replete with suburban, country clothes, commuting to work, with the Mertzes as gentlemen chicken farmers. At the same time, Ricky has moved from performer, to manager, to movie star, to owner of the Club Babaloo. Lucy has also been 'working'. 'Little Ricky Gets a Dog', 'Little Ricky Plays the Drums', and everyone goes to 'Little Ricky's School Pageant'; it goes without saying that the latter are among the least interesting episodes. Finally, in an intrusion of the real, after a further season of one-hour shows the stars separated and were divorced. Lucille Ball bought out Desi Arnaz and continued in a successful, single-parent series with her two 'real' children—themselves the stars in 1984 of TV 'tributes' to Lucille Ball.

Barthes wrote of myth: 'The science of the signifier brings contemporary mythology a second rectification . . . Taken aslant by language, the world is written through and through, signs, endlessly deferring their foundations, infinitely citing one another, nowhere come to a halt. . . .'²² Television as: 1) the erasure of history; 2) the loss of aesthetic dimension; 3) the hold of leaden passivity; and 4) the realm of idiocy are constant arguments used almost to *stop* the flow of TV, as if cessation were possible. The media ecology of continual citation and repetition is an infinite, deferred circularity, described in different ways by White, Barthes, and Baudrillard. Narrative and the star system, in its conflation of the real with the imaginary in a cause-effect chronology of familiar scenes, is a party to simulation, the referent only a signifier elided with the fiction and conflated with 'tabloid trivia'. Somehow, another modelling of power is at stake, one which terrifies 'high art' critics and 'classical scholars' alike.

INITIATIVES

NEWSLETTER.

SEFT

EDITORIAL

Teachers have for many years recognised the importance of educating students about the media. There can be no doubt that their recognition is becoming ever more widely shared. Courses about the media now appear to proliferate across a range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, under MSC and TVEI rubrics, as Communications Studies at 'A' and 'O' level, as Media Studies and Film Studies at the same levels and at CEE and CSE. The aims of these courses are various - in fact almost as various as the claims made for the importance of media education. Some stress technical competence while others aim to equip students with a critical knowledge of how different media function in our society.

The DES Report 'Popular Television and Schoolchildren' published in April 1983 put media education on an official agenda. But members of the Society of Education in Film and Television (SEFT) have been campaigning for and teaching about media education since the early sixties. Many courses, especially at levels of further and higher education are now well established because of SEFT's work, not least because of the Society's publication of Screen and Screen Education. However, in spite of the comparatively recent proliferation of courses in spite of a growing recognition of the importance of media education, teachers of the media are still up against all odds.

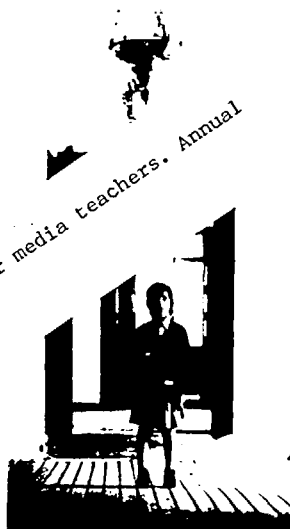
To establish any course on the media means a business of persuasion and implementation. Even though some media studies courses have been running for well over ten years, the subject is still perceived as new fangled and therefore unrespectable. The low status accorded to media education in schools and colleges now threatens its place in the secondary curriculum, peripheral at best.

While a core curriculum for media education is being developed in Northern Ireland and Wales but as yet, no provision made in England and Wales. In Scotland, the case is otherwise. It is crucial that media education be an integral part of any core curriculum. If a campaign for media education is to have any single end it must be to achieve these implications.

If the secondary school core then the media in primary schools. At the moment, the media in primary schools get even secondary colleagues. A secondary school must develop media courses in further and in-service and teacher training courses would be more extensive than they are at present. Most of the terms in which a national media education could take the kind of teaching about the media which would develop, must be determined not by edicts from Whitehall but by teachers themselves.

This first issue of Initiatives marks SEFT's commitment to intervene and once again direct a national campaign for media education. This issue also marks SEFT's commitment to support, encourage and link teachers of the media. We already have the beginnings of a regional network of people involved in media education who came together for the first time at the BFI Easter School. We intend this issue to strengthen and develop this network. (See the subscription form on the back page).

There is news of events, conferences, publications. This is the first of what should be many Initiatives. It has been produced by a small group of teacher members of SEFT working in London. It is intended that Initiatives should be produced and distributed termly on a national basis. It is essential therefore that as many teachers from as many different areas as possible read, subscribe and contribute to future issues. Support and inform SEFT's Initiatives. As educators in film and television make your initiatives count.



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Subscription to 'Initiatives' costs £2 per year, but it comes free to the first person to identify the films and their stars shown in this issue of Britain's only newsletter for media educators. Answers on a postcard to SEFT at the address shown below.

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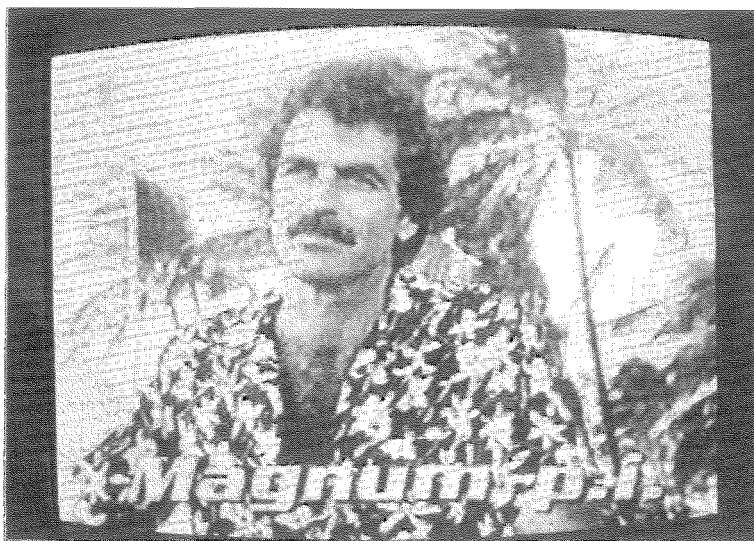
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THIGHS AND WHISKERS: THE FASCINATION OF 'MAGNUM, p.i.'

BY SANDY FLITTERMAN



FAR FROM THE androgyno-erotics of a Michael Jackson, Thomas Sullivan Magnum, or Tom Selleck—this effacement of the boundaries between persona and personality is crucial—is undeniably male. His sexuality is channelled in the clearly defined cultural circuits of 'masculinity': a healthy athleticism, a jocular sense of (male) camaraderie, an easygoing virility are the attributes that cluster around his image like so many happy fans. Part of the power of this image, this *magnum opus* of masculinity, depends on the perception of both Thomas and Tom as 'regular guys', fellows who combine a strong sense of masculine capability with an endearing fallibility and awkwardness. Selleck's casual off-hand acting style is well-suited to the production of a fictional character (Magnum) whose very vulnerability makes him something of an accessible ideal. Bounding through most of the show's episodes like an affable golden retriever, Magnum the detective and Selleck the star share an all-American wholesomeness—an appeal based on astonishing good looks and self-effacing humour that has re-defined the notion of the prime-time private eye by joining a slightly embarrassed comic sense with the *machismo* of the matinée idol.

So decisively inscribed in the iconography of manliness is the Mag-

num/Selleck image that attempts to capitalise on his star quality by means of a pin-up style photo (reclining on a hammock, elbows out and arms supporting a smiling face, high angle photography and high key lighting) have been less than successful. And no wonder – these conventions of the pin-up are traditionally almost exclusively reserved for the female. No sexual ambiguity, no confusion of gender here; in the elision of image and identity (Tom Selleck *is* Magnum) there is a fluid transfer between myth and person, character and star persona, which draws on the resources of a well-established body of cultural connotations of masculinity. While the signifying networks of gender representation involved in both television and cinema produce images of sexual identity which traditionally associate the figure of the woman with mystery – the ineffable unknown – ‘masculinity’ seems far less troubling. The representations of the Magnum/Selleck figure reinforce this conclusion: to the troubling indeterminacy of femininity (woman as a riddle, a problem, a source of anxiety . . . more on this later) is counterposed the stabilising security, the comforting precision of a clearly defined configuration of masculine attributes.

This suggests that the fascination of the programme *Magnum, p.i.* lies in something other than the commonly assumed beefcake appeal of its star. For although Selleck (and his body) are undeniably displayed as libidinal spectacle, the episodes of *Magnum, p.i.* continually manipulate – play upon – cultural constructions of masculinity; it is almost as if, in each episode, Thomas Magnum is the figure around which various reflections on masculine encoding and identity circulate. And it is this parodic, semi-ironic stance which functions to problematise the look at the male body, thereby rendering it infinitely more complex.

In his illuminating discussion of ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’¹ Steve Neale asserts that the male body is often ‘feminised’ when it functions as the object of an erotic look. Because the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema (and here I’m extrapolating to television) is implicitly male, he concludes, ‘erotic elements involved in the . . . male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed’². Thus, in relation to men there is a ‘refusal to acknowledge or make explicit an eroticism that marks . . . [the functions of] identification, voyeuristic looking and fetishistic looking’.³ I will argue, however, that something of the opposite occurs in *Magnum, p.i.* Here the erotic elements are instead exaggerated, foregrounded, exploited. The force of Magnum’s image, precisely his power as spectacle, is *mobilised* in order to play off representations of masculinity against one another, to engage in a play of cultural meanings and definitions of sexuality. Far from repressing the erotics of the gaze, the structures of fascination in looking at the male body are utilised in order to permit this signifying articulation; this in itself is a decisive element in the show’s popularity. It is this diversion, a significant derailing of the libidinal gaze which nonetheless depends on the maintenance of its erotic power, which generates the fascination of *Magnum, p.i.*

In terms of the male image, where Neale sees homosexuality as an undercurrent in need of constant repression, a very different kind of process is activated by Magnum, who is *both* decidedly masculine and decid-

¹ Steve Neale, ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’, *Screen*, November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 2-16.

² *ibid.*, p 15.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Margaret Morse, 'Sport on Television: Replay and Display', in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol 2, University Publications of America, 1983, pp 44-66.

edly on display (always keeping in mind that notions of the 'masculine' are constant constructions across a body of social practices and discourses, rather than perpetually enduring essences). Perhaps, as Margaret Morse notes in relation to televised sports, an emphasis on *display* may indicate important changes in cultural notions of masculinity, changes in 'the collective identifications or "social imaginary" which project and reinforce what it is to be a man'. 'Perhaps', she adds, 'males are on their way to becoming as dependent on "image" as females'.⁴ At any rate, the eroticism involved in looking at Tom Selleck/Thomas Magnum is in this sense *not* repressed, but somehow exacerbated (played out) in order to allow the *Magnum, p.i.* series itself to reiterate continually the parable of masculinity.

I.

It seems that a short summary might be in order here for those who do not share the engaging obsession of some twelve million viewers in the United States. (Since its première in December of 1980, *Magnum, p.i.* has remained among the ten top-rated shows on US television.) The basic plot of the series acts as a framework for the various weekly episodes. The show is set in Hawaii; its central character is a private investigator who has worked in US naval intelligence and has seen combat as a US Navy SEAL (the naval equivalent of the Green Berets) during the Vietnam War. In exchange for providing security on the fabulous grounds of celebrated (and always absent) novelist Robin Masters' estate, this investigator, Thomas Magnum, receives lodging, the use of Masters' Ferrari, and assorted amenities connected with the millionaire's life. Jonathan Higgins (played by John Hillerman), a former sergeant-major in the British Army with a penchant for rambling recollections of his service in the name of the Empire, is the estate's major-domo. Apollo and Zeus, two Doberman pinschers, sleek as seals, guard the grounds and express a peculiar animosity toward Magnum, an irritation which is an extension of the mutually annoying relationship between Magnum and Higgins. Rounding out the cast of regulars are two of Magnum's Vietnam War buddies, TC (Roger E Mosley), who owns a small island-hopping helicopter service, and Rick (Larry Manetti), who manages the beachfront King Kamehameha Club.

The *Magnum, p.i.* series takes its place in a long tradition of private eye programmes, many of which are set in exotic locales. But although its surface format (crime-stopping investigator, high speed car chases, compulsory shoot-outs, action-packed scuffles, and some light romance and humour) links it to a history nearly as old as broadcast television as we know it (NBC's *Martin Kane*, *Private Eye* was introduced in September of 1949), it is clearly distinguished from both its predecessors (*Surfside 6*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *Streets of San Francisco*, *Hawaii Five-O* and *The Rockford Files*—the latter two to which it is often compared) and subsequent shows with similar preoccupations (*Riptide*, *Matt Houston*,

Mickey Spillane's *Mike Hammer*, *Knight Rider*, *The Fall Guy*, *Simon and Simon*). The most obvious and thus easily notable distinguishing characteristic is the masculine magnetism of its star, which functions, as I have noted, as a sort of pivot for the repeated reflection on the social construction of gender. This, of course, is only possible because the Magnum/Selleck image is somehow larger than life, somehow transcends the generic definitions of the private eye. *People Magazine* unwittingly crystallised it by describing him as a 'combination of a man's man and a lady's dream', signalling the realm of the ideal into which Magnum/Selleck (as both fictional character and as star) easily settles. Unthreatened about his masculinity, and therefore unaffected by the need to defend it, he functions at once as identification figure and desired object. Thus the combination of personality traits (vulnerability, friendliness, a disarming accessibility) and idealised aspects produces an interesting dialectic: Tom Selleck conveys an impression of continual availability while remaining utterly unattainable.

The series didn't always have this unique emphasis, however. It began in the conventional mould; yet as the show progressed, the focus of attention on Magnum himself – and his particular combination of boyishness and masculine strength – increased. Selleck figures in almost every sequence of every episode; the cases where this is not true stand as noticeable aberrations. The hermeneutics of the detective-show format gradually became a kind of alibi, a pretext for the spectacle of masculinity offered by the programme's star. Thus each guest, each riddle to be solved, eventually provided a kind of showcase designed to display the specific attributes of the hero, such that the more riveting perambulations of Magnum himself (Magnum getting out of the Ferrari and striding to an investigative locale, Magnum emerging from the water and loping along the beach, Magnum traversing the expansive Hawaiian estate while musing in voice-over about some perplexing detail) began to take precedence over the more traditional modes of narrative complication.

Two developments marked this transformation: while Selleck was giving his character emotional depth and perfecting a self-mocking, slightly flustered style, the writers were creating episodes more clearly designed around the visual elaboration of the hero. The original Magnum of the pilot was the epitome of the conventional, aggressively slick James Bond character, whose highly codified behaviour worked well with a series based on formulaic action and adventure. The second pilot, however, focused on a much less perfect hero (Selleck himself is credited with the changes), and while vestiges of traditional private eye iconography appear in early episodes, the major thrust of the programme's four-year history emphasises (and here I'm quoting Margaret Morse again) the 'shared cultural ideal of masculinity... an *image* of fascination, the perfect machine of a body-in-motion choreographed... as a vision of grace and power'⁵.

I should add that, interestingly enough, the fallibility of the modified Magnum is linked to an increasing sensitivity and respect toward women. Where a 1980 CBS press release referred to the hero as a

⁵ *ibid*, pp 44, 45.

connoisseur of 'fast cars and beautiful women', as someone who enjoyed a 'rakish and unorthodox lifestyle', most subsequent episodes demonstrate instead Magnum's appreciation of women as complex and interesting human beings. Magnum still drives the Ferrari, but the somewhat dubious conditions under which he does so are frequently referred to, as in the admonishment by Higgins in one episode: 'You continue to drive a car that you do not own, do not rent, and do not even wash'. Likewise, the sexism of the original hero is relegated to the level of caricatured reputation; in one episode a young woman, an expert equestrian, says to Magnum: 'I heard you were a womaniser, a *roué*. But the moment I met you, I knew you were no *roué*. You have the kindest eyes I've ever seen'. The women in the various sequences are writers, marine biologists, doctoral candidates, journalists, teachers, ballerinas and the like; the episodes explore a kind of psychological depth in these relationships that would be impossible for the practitioner of CBS's 'rakish lifestyle'. More often than not, Magnum *diverts* the women's attraction for him, turning them down in the name of some new awareness of their own career motivations and goals.

What seems to be in operation here is a kind of transfer of sexual energy, in this case a re-channelling of the negotiated erotics of television viewing; Magnum is partly transformed from a dashing macho-mythical figure with which a largely male audience can identify, into a desired and desirable object whom mostly female viewers can long to possess. This psychic collusion of being and having within a single potent figure at once collapses the distinction between traditionally gendered subjectivity and objectivity, identification and desire, and blurs the boundaries between erotic identity and object choice as forms of visual pleasure. Magnum's double narrative status as both subject and object thus increases his position of fascination, a fascination which is reinforced by his constant visual presence in every episode.

This shift in what Magnum himself represents (and the concomitant psychic richness for the spectator) entails a shift in audience as well. Another way to account for the programme's popularity, then, is to take into consideration the preponderantly female audience which is added to the traditional viewership of private eye shows. Obviously, the question of audience is extremely complicated, but what I'm suggesting here is that the programme's popularity with women is based on something more than pure erotic appeal. It has to do with the interesting reversal involved in this transfer from the subject of desire to desired object. Whereas an object of identification is traditionally endowed with an aggregate of features, an object of desire is the result of some reifying process of objectification. However, with Magnum the move from identification figure to desired object carries with it an *increase* in dimensions. Thomas Magnum, then, is a *multi-faceted* desired object, one who somehow escapes reification and is all the more desirable because of this. It is something of a paradoxical reversal, then, for as the Magnum *character* becomes more three-dimensional in the traditional realist sense (more sensitive to women, more fallible and flustered), the Magnum

image becomes more focalised, more central to the mechanics of the show.

It is therefore possible to see two parallel factors accounting for the magnetism of *Magnum, p.i.* both the result of a studied emphasis on the Magnum/Selleck figure and the visual pleasure evoked: 1) The show differs in focus from other private-eye adventure programmes (while at the same time capitalising on the wide audience available to this enduring television form), and 2) Magnum himself represents a different type of masculine hero (who both encompasses and re-works the traditional characteristics of the private investigator). As the playful title to my article indicates, a certain erotic appeal associated with Selleck's body gained iconic precedence as the series progressed. This can be charted in each episode by the increasing preponderance of shots of Selleck, matched only by the decrease in romantic involvements of any kind for him. (This does not necessarily mean that episodes evoking Magnum's love-life have not been aired; rather, instead, the few shows that do involve this – Magnum with his lovely and tragically irretrievable Vietnamese wife, Magnum with his adorable and keenly attracted first client, Magnum with his mysterious and captivating Asian girlfriend from the past – are not the programme's norm.) As the episodes turned more conclusively around the idealised image of masculinity that the Magnum/Selleck figure represents, the programmatic and conventional 'sex appeal' effects – such as those offered by bikini-clad beach bunnies of the sort that populate more overt male-fantasy action programmes such as *Riptide* and *The Fall Guy* – began to disappear. And concomitant with this was a noticeable change in Magnum's wardrobe: casual slacks and polo shirts gave way to tank tops and shorts or swimming trunks, marking the transfer from a commodified sexuality both exploitative of and repugnant to women, toward an elaboration of the gaze whose object was an image of masculine power and perfection.

In other words, to return to my point of departure, it should be clear by now whose thighs, what whiskers are evoked in my title. Augmenting the repetitive emphasis on the programme's star are two recurring types of shots which appear in nearly every episode, each designed to maximise the impact of Selleck's visual magnificence. The first, a medium long-shot, usually depicts Magnum walking out of the blue waters of the Pacific after a contemplative swim. (The same effect is sometimes accomplished through shots of Magnum striding in shorts or cut-offs.) The accompanying voice-over provides narrative anchoring for what would otherwise be an instance of pure erotic display. The second type of shot, a close-up, usually in low angle with a breezy blue sky as background, emphasises three of Selleck's characteristic facial traits, the green eyes, craggy dimples, and golden, shaggy moustache (with its connotations of sensuality and masculinity). Both types of shots – the thighs and the whiskers – make the most of natural elements (wind, surf, sand, sunshine) to enhance the image, confirm the idealisation of Selleck/Magnum's figure and physique. But where the first type of shot usually distances this image through the use of somewhat ironic narration ('I know

what you're thinking . . . ', etc), in a sense articulating the visual with verbal discourse, the second type of shot more readily provides the viewer with unmediated access to the image, obliterating the distance between viewer and viewed and absorbing the viewer in specular desire.

II.

Magnum, p.i. is basically an all-male show, but not all of its leading men share Selleck's luminous position. In fact, as I noted at the outset, each of the other characters represents one or two components of the masculine image of which Thomas Magnum is the sum total and idealised whole. And in their partial, stylised representations of gender codification, all three of the surrounding males – TC, Rick and Higgins – fall quite short of the vaguely Aryan ideal suggested by Magnum himself. TC, the Black helicopter mechanic, is a paragon of physical strength, as evidenced every week by the presentational shot of his emphatic musculature in the opening credit sequence. 'Rick', as his nickname indicates (Orville is his actual name), is a nightclub operator who continually postures and parodies the smooth, unflappable toughness of a Bogie character. This, too, is iconically signified in the credit sequence, where Rick either tips his hat or poses in a snazzy suit (depending on the season to which the episode belongs). Actually, what remains of the Bogart parody is a toned-down version of the original Rick character. Donald Bellisario, *Magnum's* executive producer and co-creator with Glen Larson, has both written and directed episodes. He initially had Rick invent the Bogie persona to hide his terror in Vietnam. The network complained about the character's bad Bogart imitations, not realising that they were intentional, and all that remains now are innuendos, vestiges of this attempt to align personality with cultural myth. Finally, Magnum's bantering adversary, the overwhelmingly British Jonathan Higgins, veers between obsessive propriety and excessive gallantry, his suave sophistication and urbanity acting as a foil to Magnum's all-American naturalness, ease and spontaneity.

This shorthand characterisation and embodiment of masculine traits is further elaborated by an episodic narrative structure which continually puts these representations into play. While it is true that the episodes usually involve some sort of criminal activity and investigative chase – missing persons, suicides, drug deals, political assassination attempts, jewel heists, corporate embezzlement, military espionage, kidnappings, robberies, and the like – there are really only a few basic plot types for the series, each of which in some way demonstrates, reflects upon and manipulates codes of masculinity. The episode entitled 'I Witness', for example, is something of an affectionate parody along these lines. One of the few programmes which does *not* revolve around Magnum himself, it concerns a closing-time hold-up of the King Kamehameha Club at which Rick, TC and Higgins are all present. Magnum's help is enlisted to solve the crime, and the episode consists of all three men's conflicting descriptions, each flashback representing the self-perception of the char-

acter whose version it is, and making the heroics depend entirely on an exaggeration of that character's manly virtues.

Concomitant with his Bogie image, Rick's version has him emerging as the tough-guy hero while TC is more concerned with trying to seduce an uninterested woman and Higgins falls prey to a flood of babbling verbiage as he obsessively and characteristically recalls instances of his own military heroism. TC's version has him invited for a nightcap by the same woman (she now has a PhD in economics) who finds him 'enlightened, compassionate, and socially wise'. Here, he is a picture of masculine strength and composure next to Rick's cowardly trembling and Higgins' frightened delirium. In his version, Higgins, of course, is the image of nobility amid writhing chaos; he deals with the situation with 'aplomb, alacrity, and experience'. He reasons with the culprits and finally resorts to an expert display of karate to bring the situation under control. The entire episode, then, is a narrational version of a macho-competition, each contestant fashioning an ideal self-image through discourse in order to illustrate his prowess. Magnum, who for all purposes has been absent from a good three-quarters of the episode, solves the crime and emerges as the true hero, untainted by the need either to defend or display his masculinity. And the audience, in its turn, experiences a good deal of pleasure in (I hesitate to say having its cake and eating it) both enjoying the manliness that Magnum represents and participating in a distanced critical appraisal of masculine behaviour.

What 'I Witness' parodies, the rest of the episodes articulate in a more serious way. A typology of narrative motifs illustrates the few basic themes (all dealing with representations of masculinity) around which the different shows cluster, regardless of their surface narrative effects. Some episodes deal with investigative involvements with women, putting Magnum in a situation of *displaced* romance in relation to a woman who has disappeared at the beginning of the programme ('Wave Good-bye', 'Skin Deep'). Others are genre parodies ('The Black Orchid', 'The Return of Luther Gillis') in which the conventions of *film noir* or TV private-eye programmes are playfully examined. Still others turn on the placing of sexual codes in crisis, as when a political assassin disguises himself as a woman in order to pass unnoticed ('The Jororo Kill'). Then there are the episodes which clearly incorporate a romantic motive; these, significantly, do not involve Magnum in the amorous relationship. In the 'romance trilogy' (my term), all three of the male characters – Rick, TC, and Higgins – fall in love with women who are each particularly suited to their specific masculine attributes and needs. Magnum, however, only figures investigatively, exploring each episode's narrative complications while leaving romance behind. In 'Woman on the Beach', Rick falls in love with a ghostly apparition, a woman who uncannily disappears as soon as Rick gets close; 'Letters to a Duchess' allows Higgins to enact his ideal of gallantry and manners; and 'Paradise Blues' finds TC overpowered by a fatal attraction for a self-destructive woman whom he had known in Vietnam.

More recently, there has been a preponderance of episodes of male camaraderie in which female characters are excluded altogether. Instead

This association is augmented by the fact that in his voice-off monologues Magnum incessantly refers to Hawaii as an elusive and seductive woman, indulging paradisiacal fantasies and caressing all with her fascinating visual opulence. But it is not simply this exotic and erotic appeal which confers on Hawaii a sexualised feminine identity; something of the heterogeneity of her cultural richness (in 1891, when Queen Liliuokalani attempted to end foreign influence on the islands, there were Americans, British, Germans, Chinese and Portuguese in addition to the native Hawaiians of Polynesian descent), a marginalised play of differences against the asserted stability of fixed poles, locates the signifiers of Hawaii in the realm of the cultural connotations of the feminine. A land of contrasts – orchids and volcanoes, rugged cliffs and smooth sandy beaches, rich indigenous cultures and Western imperialist influences – Hawaii is posed as a marginal locale, an insular ‘dark continent’ halfway between the East coast of Southeast Asia (say, Vietnam) and the west coast of the US (say, Malibu). The *Magnum, p.i.* series takes this complexity as its formative matrix: whereas Magnum himself represents a stabilised resolution of these contradictions (a Vietnam veteran with a Californian ethos who in a sense takes charge of the miniature imperialist enclave), the mystery and romance of the islands, their intersection of mysticism and concrete historical facts, remain perpetually in flux, perpetually elusive but always there, permeating the text of each episode.

III.

An episode entitled ‘Woman on the Beach’ offers another variation on this archetypal polarity, one in which the masculine and feminine principles are embodied in the characters themselves. The episode involves the pursuit of an elusive female figure and the investigation into her mysterious death some 35 years earlier. In accord with the prohibition on romantic involvement for Magnum, Rick is the one who falls in love with the enigmatic Sarah, while Magnum, out of friendship, attempts to discover her secret. It is an episode rich with allegorical possibilities: a resolute and forceful masculine figure pursues an image of woman as other – veiled, perplexing, fleeing, unattainable. This is encapsulated in a cogent metonymy at one point in the episode: a gardener (on the grounds where Magnum has followed the woman) knocks Magnum unconscious and removes first his baseball cap, then the gauzy scarf he is clutching. Cap and scarf, punctual evocations of masculine pursuer and vanishing, evanescent female, signify what this emblematic episode (and by extension, the series) turns on. For it is precisely this circulation of symbolic figures – an appealing and infinitely available masculine figure, a baffling, equivocal woman with whom all relationship is an impossibility – which both permits and ensures the perpetual focus on Magnum as libidinal object.

The episode is distinguished by a remarkable coherence and unity; its sophisticated structure involves the varied reiteration of several basic narrative situations. Briefly, Rick meets the attractive and mysterious

'Sarah Clifford' at the King Kamehameha Club after he has been stood up by a date and ribbed by his unsympathetic comrades. A walk on the moonlit beach produces no insight into her tragic past; in fact, she literally disappears when Rick turns his head, leaving him bereft and hopelessly in love. Magnum decides to help, and his investigation leads to shipping magnate Henry Ellison's office, where he and Rick learn that the woman Rick met died 35 years earlier. Intrigued by this hint of the supernatural, Magnum goes out to the old Clifford estate only to find the veiled and silent woman leading him on a chase through the grounds, from the tennis court to the hothouse and finally to the potting shed. Further investigation leads to Lisa Page, a woman remarkably like the baffling Sarah and someone capable of at least partially clarifying the situation. She is the niece of Sarah Clifford and, unwilling to believe that her disappearance was a suicide, she is writing a book about her aunt. When Magnum and Rick find the filmy veils of 'Sarah Clifford' in Lisa's house, she furiously orders them to leave. Perplexed by the scarf he has found at the potting shed, Magnum enlists Rick and TC; they discover a skeleton buried at the very spot where the scarf was found. By this time it has become clear that Ellison, an unsuccessful suitor, had murdered Sarah and is now intent on eliminating Lisa. He visits her house, makes her dress up in the veils, takes her to the Clifford estate and then chases her with the aim of killing her too. Magnum and Rick arrive in time, of course, and Lisa is saved.

But it is the final sequence which provides a unique and startling twist. Lisa and Rick, Magnum and TC are sharing drinks at the Club when Lisa admits to having dressed up as Sarah, but denies leading Magnum to the hothouse (etc). Magnum, having 'had enough ghost stories for this week', goes to the beach for a contemplative smoke. Suddenly, Sarah appears, her face half hidden in the shadows. But as Magnum looks off to confirm that Lisa is actually at the table with Rick, the woman vanishes. All that meets Magnum's astonished return gaze is the empty shore, the waves catching the moonlight in such a way as to shimmer like Sarah's veil.

The episode is structured around the three reiterative chase sequences (plus a coda) in which the veiled, enigmatic female figure (each time an avatar of the same fundamental feminine persona) escapes a masculine pursuer, variously portrayed as threatening or benign, visible or unseen. Each chase defines and then restructures a relationship to a woman: she is in some sense the object in all three, while the pursuer of each varies. The first chase is the initiating flashback; opening the episode, it depicts Sarah's actual death in the summer of 1945. Yet the assailant is present only as a point of view, and the particulars of the chase and murder are left obscure. In the second chase, Magnum pursues Lisa who is dressed up as Sarah, though the episode's conclusion forces a reinterpretation of this chase as that between Magnum and a ghost. The third chase involves Lisa and Ellison; here, while the exact identity of both pursuer and pursued is known, the pursuit is more complicated because, in a sense, Ellison is chasing *both* Sarah and Lisa, while Magnum and Rick

⁶ Here again the important slippage between character and star persona comes into play; Tom Selleck, a California 'golden boy' from the San Fernando Valley, is an avid athlete who played basketball on his college team (though he was equally skilled at baseball). His early acting roles capitalised on this aura of athleticism. In 20th Century Fox's 1969 prime-time soap-opera experiment, *Bracken's World*, Selleck played one of the volleyball regulars at the talent teacher's Malibu beach house. And in *Coma* (1978), Selleck's character, suffering from a knee injury during a touch football game, dies in the opening sequence; the fact that this untoward accident occurs to such a healthy physical specimen provides the first signal that something is very wrong in the hospital.

there is an emphatic concentration on sports, male bonding, and masculine pursuits. (Interestingly enough, the episodes that most deeply explore the effects of the Vietnam War and the range of experiences taken up with it, do not fall into this category. Vietnam flashbacks are much more likely to appear in episodes in which the ghosts of the past swirl into present-day complications, evoking the war as a complex of interminable effects and consequences.) The male camaraderie episodes instead revolve around softball games, bare knuckle boxing, football and baseball enthusiasm (Magnum's ubiquitous Detroit Tigers cap), surf skiing or endurance sports like the Iron Man competition (though these last two involve an ironic undercutting of Magnum's athletic capabilities).⁶

But what of romance? Surely if *Magnum, p.i.* were nothing more than a narrativised spectator sport, the impact of the widespread female viewership which it enjoys would be diminished considerably. While there is certainly a surfeit of scopophilic pleasure involved in the sports episodes in particular, the attraction of these viewers seems to depend on something else in addition. As I noted before, much of the fantasmatic power of the Magnum figure depends on the constructed impression of Magnum/Selleck as infinitely available, depends on displacing or diverting his romantic involvement. It is in this context that Hawaii, eternally exotic, mysterious and seductive, can be seen to function as something more than a simple setting for the action, providing something other than background locale. For it does not seem impossible that the land of Hawaii itself, in this context, works as a signifier of the feminine, a female icon which plays counterpart to Magnum's instantaneous and stylised representation of the male.

The scenic extravagance and lush natural beauty of Hawaii with its abundant connotations of exoticism and sensuality are evoked repeatedly, even before the weekly episode begins, by the programme's opening credits. In several of the title shots a helicopter swoops over a green wilderness of mountains covered with tropical foliage, races over glistening tidelines with their lunar rhythms, soars over fertile valleys through intense, sunny skies. The driving yet lyrical beat of the theme music adds to the feeling of transport associated with Hawaii's mystique, its lure as tropical paradise. These are the same credits which depict Magnum, in almost half of the 35 shots, in a litany of characteristic appearances, a typage of masculine modes: Magnum in the Ferrari, Magnum on the beach, Magnum in Vietnam, Magnum goofing off, Magnum in dress uniform, Magnum in cut-offs, Magnum in the jungle, Magnum in the chopper. . . . Each micro-situational unit, serialising the image of Tom as image, teases us with narrative possibilities and whets our appetite for more. Women, however, are almost entirely absent from this introduction (there are only two shots of women, and they are exceedingly difficult to discern—one is obscured by scuba gear, the other only partially visible in the ocean). Thus here in the credits, to the definitiveness of the repeated assertion of the masculine icon is juxtaposed an aura of majestic natural splendour, evoking the pervasive sense of mystery and romance that is traditionally associated both with Hawaii itself and with the feminine figure.

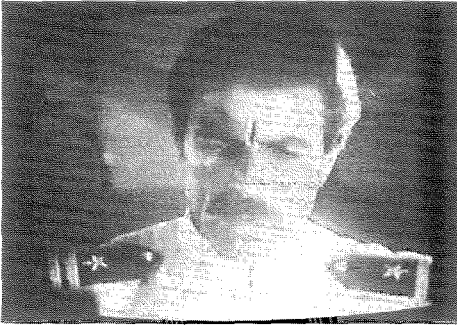
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The masculine hero in the feminine tropes: shots from the *Magnum, p.i.* title sequence.

⁷ The *Magnum P.I.* music is by Mike Post and Pete Carpenter, the same men responsible for the music on *Rockford Files* and *The A-Team*. The Post-Carpenter music is the same for action sequences in most episodes of all three shows – *domp da da bomp damp damp* – but *Magnum's* music uses bongo drums, tambourines, guitars for variety and 'Hawaiian-ness'.

are chasing Ellison. I will discuss the final vision of the woman, the coda, below.

If each of the chase sequences involves a different version of the female character, in terms of the narrative they are, in fact, different women. It is due to the consummate skill of Judith Chapman that each one – Sarah, Lisa, the ghost – is characterised by completely distinct voice modulations, facial expressions, and mannerisms which contribute to the notion of very separate personalities. The Sarah of the flashback is playful, spirited and slightly naive, while Lisa is strident, determined and confident; the spectral Sarah is mysterious, somewhat tragic and ultimately seductive. Yet in spite of this significant variation, it is part of the force of the final sequence to restore this variety to a totalising signifier of an elusive female presence. The rhythmic repetition of the chase sequences contributes to this, masking the difference of the individual female characters with an overlay of similarity and redundancy.

The opening sequence, anchored temporally by the title 'Summer 1945', offers the woman as victim before any narrative psychology or motivation can provide her with a substance. At first it is an idyllic image: to the period strains of 'Satin Doll' and the gentle sounds of a cocktail party, a young woman in white runs happily in the shadows to meet her lover. She is figured in an almost abstract play of light and shadow as she darts about the foliage. Her expression turns to one of fear as she realises that the man in the darkness is her attacker, and as the pursuit heightens, non-diegetic music begins. This is the first in a series of musical accompaniments that mark all three of the chase sequences; all are variations on the credits theme music, using brass, percussion, muted horns and kettle drum to punctuate the suspense.⁷ This first chase provides an almost minimalist opening to the episode, using elliptical elements such as footsteps (of the unseen attacker), cries for help, close-ups of the locked shed door, off-screen sounds of struggle, to indicate almost hieratically the commission of a crime and the installation of the original trauma which sets the episode in motion. Structurally, this is the antecedent history of the episode, something that will henceforth not be figured, but will continue to haunt the actions of the characters as primary motivation, the fantasmatic generator of the fiction.

The second chase occurs when Magnum visits the Clifford estate. His characteristic voice-off opens the sequence when suddenly, in a condensation which associates woman, veil, mystery and music, 'Sarah' appears – her face obscured – and leads him through the murderous trajectory of the opening sequence. There are significant differences, however. This chase occurs in daylight, and the pursuer is fully in view. The spectator has a detached position outside the action – watching Magnum chasing and watching – while the first sequence was mainly depicted from within the attacker's point of view. Thus it is the *spectacle* of the chase, posing male and female archetypes in a symbolic situation, which characterises the interest of this sequence. The chase ends as Magnum picks up the scarf, an expression of confusion on his face. This close-up prefigures the important concluding shot of the episode, an indication of Magnum's bafflement in the face of the mystery of woman. A commercial break

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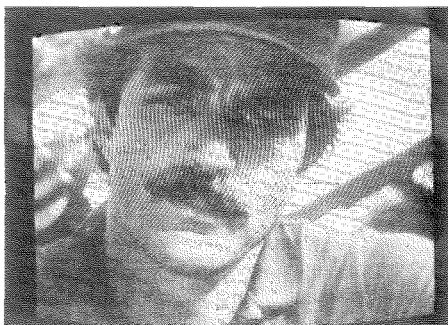
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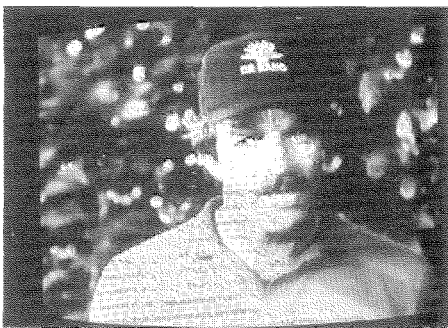
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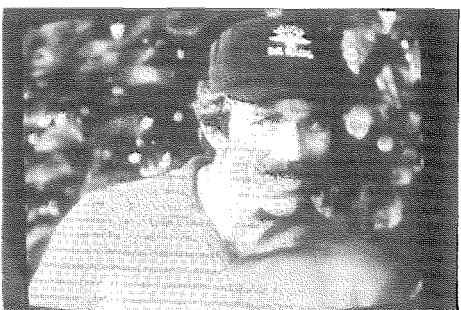
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Magnum chases the mysterious 'Sarah' (1-4) and then engages in a baffling exchange (5-8)

separates the chase from the crucial exchange which follows, pivotal in that it counterposes a mysterious and cryptic woman with the affable and ironic Magnum in a paradigm of frustrated communication which underlines their impossible coupling.

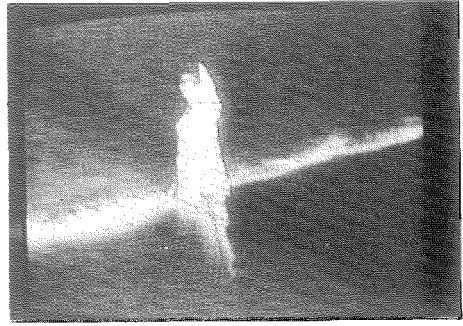
The third chase occurs in daylight as well, but the orchestration of archetypes is now replaced by fully developed characters: we have a more complete view of Lisa's face and her assailant, Ellison, has the psychology, motivation and representation that he lacked in the first sequence. As with the two previous pursuits, the musical variation of the credits theme and the lack of spoken dialogue emphasise the spectacle of the chase, minimalising extraneous detail and heightening crucial elements of the narrative situation. Thus in a nightmare reiteration of the original crime, Ellison (a phantom assailant in the first chase) is about to murder Sarah's 'double' who has returned to haunt him. The sequence is resolved when Lisa runs into Rick's arms and Magnum exchanges shots with Ellison.

It is Magnum's final vision of the woman which gives the episode both its title and its uncanny power. As he stands on the beach, only the sounds of the wind and the waves are audible. Suddenly, a close-up reveals an expression of surprise, and the corresponding reverse shot, punctuated by a lyrical oboe, offers a spectral vision of 'Sarah', her face half hidden in the shadow, the moon caressing her with luminous highlights. The play of light and shadow on her face and veil, the white orchid in her hair, are elements which link this apparition to the original vision of Sarah. It is thus both the return of the repressed history of Sarah and the impossible vision of an unattainable female. When Magnum looks over at Rick and Lisa, they kiss and accomplish what he cannot. He returns his gaze to the shore only to find the woman disappeared, present only in the flickering traces of moonlight on water. The final shot is a close-up of Magnum with an endearing expression of bemused disbelief, a characteristic look that invites a relation with the spectator. For it is only fitting that in the absence of the vanished woman, the spectator feels called upon to fill the void, return the gaze and acknowledge the rapport.

In 'Woman on the Beach' the question of the past, the 'truth' of history, is intimately bound up with the question of femininity. For just as Lisa assumes a masquerade in order to discover the reality of her aunt's death, so does Magnum pursue the mysterious woman in order to solve the crime. The ghost of Sarah is the least substantial, the most 'dressed up' of the female avatars and, as such, the flower and the veil become important cultural signifiers of the mystique of femininity. The mystery of Lisa's identity, then, is the mystery of Sarah, and Magnum's pursuit of the one leads to a certain knowledge about the other. But – importantly – the truth of the murder leaves the meaning of the woman unresolved, and in fact complicates it: the ghost is finally *more* perplexing, the woman even more intriguing, a composite of the different female representations that have preceded her. Thus the farther Magnum's quest, the deeper into the past and the closer to the truth he gets. But to the degree that the hermeneutic truth – the truth of the murder – becomes



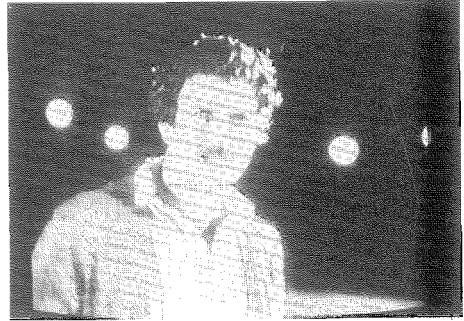
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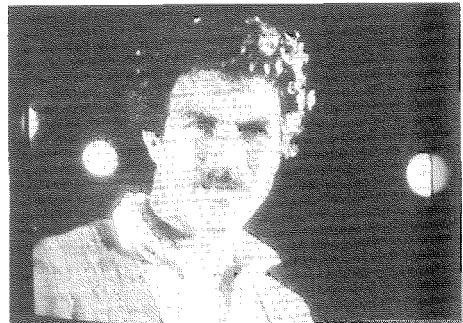
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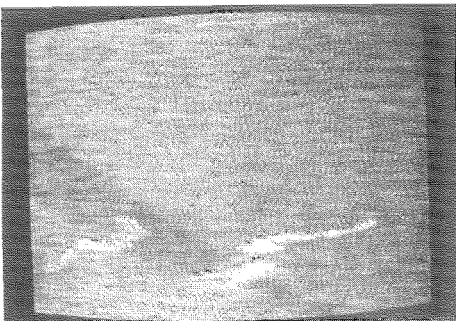
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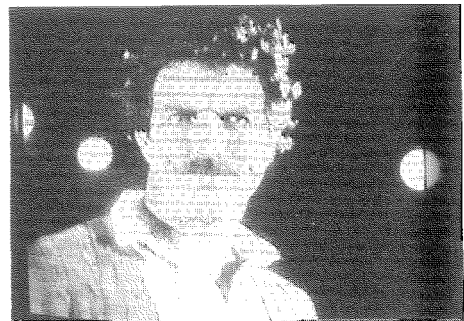
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The lady vanishes: the final vision on the beach.

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Upon Leaving the Movie Theater', in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (ed), *Apparatus*, New York, Tanam Press, 1980, p 2.

exposed, the 'truth' of the woman becomes more insubstantial, fleeting and evanescent. The 'reality' of Sarah, in terms of her death, is gradually revealed through the discursive reconstructions of her past, the various narratives that thread together the circumstances of her life. But once this question is answered, the riddle of femininity remains; the enigmatic question that frustrates all investigative attempts endures. The 'real' Sarah is beyond resolution, a phantom on the beach that any woman can become.

IV.

'Woman on the Beach' deals with what Magnum himself, extrapolating from Higgins, refers to as a coincidence of 'family scandal, *affaire de coeur*, and links with the netherworld'. When seen from a slightly different optic, this is quite a precise, if unwitting, formulation of the family/desire/phantasm constellation at the very core of the television apparatus itself. For, as Roland Barthes reminds us, television is, in its institutional form, first and foremost a family affair, a 'household utensil' which has supplanted the hearth as familial locus, though what is represented is not always – nor even primarily – family romance.⁸ And from the perspective of spectatorial desire, the texts of television are always, in some sense, affairs of the heart, desiring productions which repeatedly and variously elicit a libidinal investment on the part of the viewer. Finally, the reference to the supernatural evokes the fantasmatic nature of the television image, an imaginary signifier in its own right which, while sharing certain traits of the cinematic signifier, nevertheless requires specific conditions of production which differentiate it. Fantasy, with its roots in the visible (from the Greek *phantazein* = to make visible), is the crucial component of the television image, for it is through such circuits of meaning and pleasure that the television spectator is bound. Because it so skilfully combines relations of family, desire and psychic production, 'Woman on the Beach' is an exemplary episode, illustrative of both the television institution's mode of functioning and of *Magnum, p.i.*'s production of powerful images of sexual identity. Thomas Magnum is a highly charged object of the libidinal gaze not only for the idealised image of the male body that he represents (the thighs), but for his appealing personality as well (the smile, the whiskers). At a time when questions of sexuality and gender representation are wrought with contradiction, the image of masculine perfection that Magnum/Selleck embodies – notions of perfection always evoke connotations of wholeness and completeness – provides a potent and enduring icon, one whose irresistible attraction holds viewers motionless, spellbound, fasten(at)ed to their television sets.

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Special thanks to Judith Chapman, Sharon Flitterman-King and Kathryn Kalinak for their time, energy and imagination. I would also like to thank John McClure, Alan Williams, and Ken Firestone for their humour and insight. Thanks, too, to countless others who patiently forgave my obsession.

Film as a Source for Historical Study

Tuesday 7 May

Lectures and film footage will demonstrate the value of this much neglected source for twentieth century history and present some of the issues of interpretation and conservation currently being considered by specialists in this field.

Director: Colin Sorensen

For further information on the course please contact Janet Markland,
Institute of Industrial Archaeology, Ironbridge Gorge Museum,
Ironbridge, Telford, Shropshire TF8 7AW. Telephone: Ironbridge 2751
Extension 32.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

The ACS annual conference will be held at the City University, St John Street, London EC1 on March 22, 23 and 24, 1985.

The conference will be organised around a series of workshops on the theme of *Cultural Practice* in areas ranging from education to local and national funding bodies, from cinema to oral history/autobiography and music (including a disco and performances).

For further information and application forms, contact:
Mike Dawney, Middlesex Polytechnic, Cat Hill, Barnet, EN4 8HT
Tel: 01-440 5181

or

Paul Willemen, BFI Education, 127 Charing Cross Road,
London WC2H 0EA. Tel: 01-437 4355

RECONSIDERING SCREEN STUDIES

AFTERWORD ON AN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL CONFERENCE BY ANDREW TOLSON

The School of Humanities at Griffith University, Brisbane, proved to be an appropriate venue for the second national conference of the Australian Screen Studies Association¹. Members and associates of the School (staff and students) are gaining a reputation for innovative work in the field of film and media studies – work which devotes as much attention to teaching practice (including video production) as it does to critical theory. It was appropriate therefore that the School should host a conference explicitly addressed to three main constituents (media teaching, film production, current theories of film/TV) in the expectation that developments in each of these areas might productively interrelate. Perhaps the productivity, the working-through, was not as far-reaching as one might have hoped; but at least an agenda of very interesting issues was established.

Inevitably any view of a conference of this kind, where papers are scheduled for simultaneous presentation, is bound to be partial. In my case, the scheduling of my own paper clashed with a dramatic moment of polemic addressed to 'the wishy-washy pluralist discourse of current film education and writing' (Adrian Martin, 'Critical Statement'); and more generally, since I spent most of my time in the film/TV strand, this version of what the conference was about might bear very little

relation to other routes, other conferences – for instance, to a group of historically-oriented papers relating to Australian film and television, presented by Susan Dermody, Stuart Cunningham and Tom O'Regan. What I want to do here is to draw out some implications from presentations in the area of film/TV theory and education, relating these to two of the conference's opening presentations but returning to the innovative work being developed in Australia – both at Griffith and elsewhere.

Mandy Merck established two major sets of issues for the conference in her opening paper, 'Feminist Interventions and Britain's Channel Four'. Following a screening of the January 1984 *Pictures of Women* programme on pornography, *Whose Pleasure?*, she indicated the historical conditions for the POW series and outlined a number of problems involved in working in this context. A schematic summary of these problems might identify: first, a set of issues to do with institutional sites for 'independent' production; and second, a number of questions relating to formal or 'textual' criteria – highlighted in the critical response to the POW series of programmes. The first set of issues became a major theme of the conference, as Australian independent film-makers interrogated the funding strategies of the Australian Film Commission (AFC). The second set of questions persisted as a general concern both in independent production and (perhaps more interestingly) in pedagogical debates around the status, or nature, of 'text analysis'.

¹ Held December 3-7, 1984. A publication from the conference is in preparation, funded by the Australian Film Commission.

Of Channel 4, Merck raised again a set of problems familiar to readers of *Screen*² – that is, the casualised nature of this institution, with its devolution of sites of production, institutional separation of workers and management, and the consequent threat to organised trade union power. From a feminist perspective, such devolution has ambiguous effects: it has permitted some attention to discriminatory traditions of employment (more in principle than in practice); but, as exemplified by the fate of *Broadside*, the structure provides no guarantees of continuity of commissions, or of employment for essentially freelance workers. It was here that the institutional met the ideological – in the form of Channel 4's stated commitment to 'innovative' and 'independent' work. In this context C4 Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs' reply to the Women's Film and Television Network, who protested the axing of 'women's' current affairs, deserves to be quoted again:

Channel Four cannot fulfil its obligation to innovate and to keep doors open to new talent if we simply re-order the same programmes from the people who got in in our first year.

Clearly the twin axioms of 'innovation' and 'independence' retain their double-edged effects even within an institution committed (on paper) to a diversity of 'points of view'.

In a sense the Channel 4 example was instructive as much in its difference from, as its similarity to, the Australian situation. In the context of Australian network TV, and focusing on the activities of the first National Advisory Council to the ABC Board, Jonathan Dawson's paper, 'The ABC as Cultural Institution', discussed the problems of translating a concept such as 'innovation' into policy. He addressed the question of national cultural icons, and the problem of 'cultural empires' maintained within the broad concept of a 'tradition of quality broadcasting'. Problems in the field of independent production were reflected in, for instance, the presentation of a video by Lesley Stern, 'Acting out of Character', produced with support from Film Victoria (via the Victorian

Scriptwriters Workshop) and Open Channel (Melbourne). 'Innovative', in that it explored discourses of character through generic reversal (*film noir*) and textual quotation (psychoanalysis), the video nevertheless had the status of an exercise: broadcast TV's sense of production values, Stern argued, would not permit its transmission. In this situation, independent work in Australia is still dependent on regional arts funding, and on local networks of distribution and exhibition. The question repeatedly posed concerned the political direction of regional policies which tended to favour 'product', from whatever source – as opposed to more diverse, experimental, workshop-type activities.

This question of institutional priorities was taken up by Paul Willeman in his paper, 'The Politics of Avant-Garde Film Practice'. Willeman referred to the recent 'professionalisation' of the independent sector in Britain, in the wake of the kinds of developments represented by Channel 4. However, he argued, such professionalisation might be problematic if it begins to displace an equally necessary debate around the *kinds* of films people want to make, or think should be produced. This seemed to strike a chord with Australian film-makers, some of whom were clearly dismayed by newly stringent practices of application and accounting introduced by the AFC. More particularly, Willeman argued that institutions such as the AFC (and the British Film Institute) should themselves have a clear policy of funding priorities, relating to a political/aesthetic sense of progressive developments ('directions' to be encouraged, rather than 'positions' to be endorsed). This argument succeeded in re-orienting the critique of institutions, away from a general antagonism towards 'bureaucracy', and towards the question of what kinds of discriminations bureaucrats should be making – for instance, in providing support for training and educational work, as well as script development and production (a major issue, where workshop practices are concerned).

Together with a keynote address from AFC Director Kim Williams, these presentations established the question of institutional conditions as a first item on the conference agenda. But of course this question is relatively clearly posed (it imposes itself) from the point of view of independent film production. Less clear is the relation between this site and what may, or

² See John Ellis, 'Channel 4 – Working Notes', *Screen* November–December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 37–51; also Eight Programme-Makers: 'Channel 4 – One Year On', *Screen* March–April 1984, vol 25 no 2, 1984; pp 4–25.

may not be going on in classrooms and/or in current theoretical work. Both opening presentations saw a relation of sorts between production and theory but they posed it differently. Willemsen proposed a discrimination between modernism and the avant-garde (arguing that bureaucrats should be supporting the avant-garde) in terms of a general history of class-cultural formations³. Merck argued around the question of feminist practice, citing observations that certain strategies borrowed from avant-garde cinema (e.g. foregrounding the presence of the camera) had proved problematic for POW's intervention within broadcast television.⁴ The question raised here, sharply defined in terms of the response to *Pictures of Women*, went on to haunt the conference: what textual or institutional strategies would constitute a critical perspective on, or challenge to, the practices of broadcast television?

The 'interface' between film and television studies had been demarcated as a specific area of interest in the conference programme. Perhaps the most significant, certainly the most wide-ranging presentation in this area was Noel King's 'What is Television Studies?' – in which he constructed a diverse list of ten ways of talking about TV, viz:

- (1) ways of differentiating TV from cinema as a social space (domestic vs theatrical);
- (2) attempts to identify basic elements of the television text ('flow', 'segments', etc.);
- (3) the specific focus on TV's modes of address (direct, indirect);
- (4) a debate over what counts as the television 'text' (single programmes, genres, or a concept of 'supertext');
- (5) definitions of television as 'social text' (relating to publicity, commentary, journalism);
- (6) ways of identifying 'discourses' on television – which may not be specific to it (e.g. history, biography, character);
- (7) a tendency (still) to evaluate aesthetically specific TV programmes (prestige dramas, or currently, *Hill Street Blues*);
- (8) production studies of single programmes, or more recently, enterprises (MTM/Euston Films);
- (9) not forgetting 'effects' studies (TV violence, etc) and more recent debates around 'audience research'.

Finally,

- (10) King advocated an approach to television studies which precisely recognises this diversity in their construction.

The effect of this paper was to interrupt the quest for a general theory of television, as a specific 'signifying practice'. Currently, particularly when the approach is made from a film studies background, television is identified as an object, or text 'in itself' – to which one or another 'theory of television' may be appropriate. The resulting problematic is often constructed in terms of a series of general oppositions, such as:

CINEMA	TV
theatrical 'event'	domestic 'flow'
past tense (record)	present tense (live)
story	discourse
continuity	fragmentation
identification	desire
order	excess
good object	bad object

In the light of a critique of film theory developed at Griffith University (by Dugald Williamson, one of the conference organisers) it is not too difficult to detect in these oppositions a general phenomenological discourse of text and reader – such that texts are ranged in an order of intrinsic properties ('closure', 'contradiction') and the place of the reader is an effect of textual recognition.⁵

Such general models surfaced at the conference, notably in John Fiske's presentation: 'Television: a Multi-Level Classroom Resource'. Here, the teaching of television involved student recognition, via close reading, of a certain 'semiotic excess' within the text. It was suggested, for example, that the underprivileged student might identify with the 'loser' in a fictional narrative. In the ensuing discussion, doubts were expressed about teaching television in this way (or as Susan Dermody and Liz Jacka put it,

³ See Paul Willemsen, 'An Avant-Garde for the 80s', *Framework* no 24, Spring 1984.

⁴ See Lucy Moy-Thomas and Susan Stein, 'Pictures of Women', *Undercut* 12, 1984, pp 58-61.

⁵ Dugald Williamson's PhD thesis, 'Reconsidering Film Theory' (1983) develops this argument in relation to realist discourses on cinema and to the film theory associated with *Screen*.

teaching television at all) to students for whom the meanings of television are already quite 'obvious'. But what if a critical pedagogy, in the field of television studies, did not take the form of a training in close reading/recognition – but rather, as Noel King suggested, a survey of the various ways TV has been read, discussed and used? The phenomenological practice would then be one among many, which might also include a history of cultural institutions, rhetorical practices, consumer and audience research.

It is conventional to identify what is at stake here in terms of some kind of move 'beyond' text analysis. In a final forum on TV studies, for example, it was suggested that 'text analysis' be supplemented, or perhaps displaced, by a 'critical sociology' of television – a sociology of popular culture. To some extent it may be true that the 'textual' approach to film and television studies derives from a literary-critical orientation which has not been entirely displaced (especially in the classroom) through the '70s.⁶ Equally, however, it is not clear that conventional sociologies (of culture, or mass communications) are in any position to provide that which 'close reading' ignores; nor is it appropriate simply to dissolve the text into a history of 'contexts' – institutions and their audiences.

It is here that the Griffith approach to media studies seems to have much to offer – as a way through a disciplinary impasse. The term 'discipline' is used precisely, to refer to a way of reorganising theoretical work and teaching. For instance, the critique of the phenomenological model of text and reader does not, at Griffith, simply lead to a displacement of 'text analysis'. On the contrary, the 'text' is re-defined as a complex (not necessarily unified) site for various rhetorical and discursive practices. In this sense, there is nothing ontologically 'specific' about television; rather, one could say that television functions as an institutional site for various rhetorical strategies, various discursive domains. In 'Anecdotal Television' (published in this issue) I attempted to identify a particular rhetorical practice used by television – though I also came close to asserting that this is a characteristic of TV in general. Ian Hunter, in 'Believable Characters', related the construction of character in the script development to the use of biographical schema as a technique of individuation.

There are several implications of this 'neo-rhetorical' approach to text analysis. In the first place, in terms of theoretical work, 'texts' are returned to historical and institutional analysis. It can be demonstrated that rhetorical strategies have a history: for example, that techniques of biography had a particular place in Renaissance homilies constructing the 'lives of artists'⁷; or, as Ian Hunter has also argued, what we now take to be 'plausible character' in films or TV has a history relating to the use of moral psychology in nineteenth century pedagogies⁸. There is thus no question of displacing the text, or supplementing it with a history or sociology of institutions. In this approach, 'texts' (rhetorics, discourses) are institutional and historical in the first place.

But this approach also entails a different kind of teaching practice. To put it schematically, if the object of study is no longer the (unified or contradictory) 'text', but rather a variety of practices and techniques – then students can be taught not to 'read' and 'interpret', but to *operate* with/against techniques of representation. At Griffith, a specific use is made of video work, in which students are not invited generally to 'create', or to 'simulate' professional practices – rather they are assigned assessable tasks relating to definite strategies: for example, how to construct a video around a topic (youth unemployment) which does not reproduce biographies (of 'alienated youth') or recognisable characters in dramatic situations. Ian Hunter's presentation concluded with a demonstration of one student's work: a 'kitchen sink' drama in which a discourse of popular egalitarianism encountered several feminisms⁹.

What is produced in classrooms such as these might be of interest to other sites for film and video production. In *Pictures of Women* a difficulty arises, I think, with the use of *voices* – voices which speak from recognisable places, as characters and personalities, ranged in a

6 See John Caughie, 'Television Criticism', *Screen* July-October 1984, vol 25 nos 4-5, pp 109-120, which discusses the development of film theory in relation to literary criticism.

7 Ian Hunter, 'Realist Cinema and the Memory of Fascism', *Australian Journal of Communication*, nos 5-6, 1984. This issue contains several articles by members of the Griffith School of Humanities.

8 Ian Hunter, 'Reading Character', *Southern Review*, July 1983, vol 16 no 2, pp 226-243.

9 Ross Harley, 'Australian Fragments', Honours Dissertation (Vidco-tape), Griffith University, 1982.

64 hierarchy (direct and indirect modes of address). The POW tape attempted several distantiating effects, but it did not seem to address this central problem: how to 'de-characterise' political discourse. Without this attempt, politics will always appear, on TV, as a matter of 'opinion' or 'points of view'.¹⁰ But a deconstruction of these

terms is necessarily involved in a range of practices which are not specifically 'televisual', in their long institutional history.

¹⁰ See Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow's early argument to this effect, 'Television, a World in Action', *Screen Summer* 1977, vol 18 no 2, pp 7-59.

**Eighth Ohio University Film Conference
Narrative/Non-Narrative
31 October–2 November 1985
Call for Chairpersons and Panelists**

Much film scholarship in recent years has centred around issues of narrative, both in seeking a better understanding of how it works and how it is consumed and in positing oppositional movements to its hegemony in film and video. Recent work in history and theory has challenged assumptions about and approaches toward narrative. The Eighth Ohio University Film Conference will address itself to the topic of "Narrative/Non-Narrative."

The Eighth Ohio University Film Conference will take place 31 October through 2 November 1985 in Athens, Ohio. Panel proposals are invited which treat issues relating to narrative, including:

narration
genre and narrative
electronic narrative
national cinema narrative modes
narrative time and space
non-narrative theory (avant-garde, documentary)
technology and techniques relating to narrative cinema and video
literary narrative forms and their relation to cinema
methodologies of narrative criticism
history of narrative film

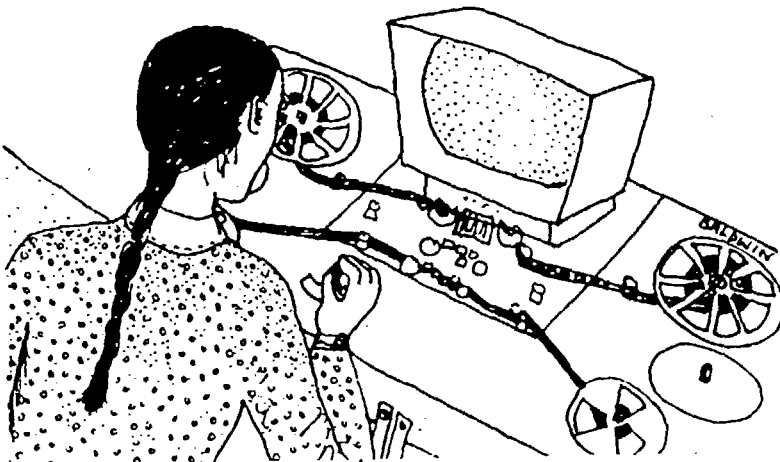
Persons interested in chairing panels relating to the above areas or chairing additional panels should contact Donald Kirihiara, Conference Director by 1 February 1985. Proposals should be sent to: Ohio University Film Conference, P.O.Box 388, Athens, OH 45701.

Panel chairs and topics will be announced by 1 March 1985. Paper abstracts relating to the above areas are welcome, but please be advised that papers not dealing with the eventual panel topics will be returned to the authors. The deadline for paper abstracts will be 1 May 1985.



The Women's Film, Television & Video Network

23 FRITH STREET, LONDON WC1.01 434 2076



VIDEO: FROM ART TO INDEPENDENCE

A SHORT HISTORY OF
A NEW TECHNOLOGY
BY STUART MARSHALL

The new technology is itself a product of a particular social system, and will be developed as an apparently autonomous process of innovation only to the extent that we fail to identify and challenge its real agencies.¹

In his *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams describes how the relationship between twentieth century communications technology and society is most usually accounted for by the powerful argument of technological determinism. Technological determinism sees a newly developed technology as being abstracted from society upon which it then has certain predictable (and sometimes unpredictable) effects. In his attempt to shift this orthodox view, Williams recasts this polarisation of Technology/Society by restoring *intention* to the process of technological research and development. Although he differentiates communications technology from that of industrial production and military technology he argues that new technologies are always sought for as an answer to needs felt by those parts of society which have the power to sanction and encourage development investment. In the particular case of broadcast communications Williams describes how the technology was developed to allow new *forms* of communication and social interaction without a developed definition of the nature of the broadcast message itself. The intended social effects of broadcast radio and television were considered to be the new possibilities of information transmission and

reception rather than the specific ideological effects of the information to be relayed. The programming problems experienced by early television broadcasters bear witness to the accuracy of his perception.

Unlike the case of broadcast television it is evident that most of the research into new video technology was very definitely concerned not only with the creation of new forms of social communication but also with the nature of the communicated message itself. For those who are excited by the radical social possibilities of the video portapak it is easy to forget that the development of this particular consumer commodity was underpinned by a vast investment in new commercial, military and managerial technology such as commercial information storage and retrieval, computer visual display units, internal television and video systems, data banking and military and commercial surveillance. In relation to this infrastructure, the portapak seems like a momentary hiccup in a process entirely committed to extending commercial and managerial control and efficiency.

Portable video technology became available in Britain in the late sixties and, as in North America, was immediately taken up by users whose interests could be described as counter-cultural. The socio-historical context into which video was inserted should be sketched out to provide some explanation for the jubilation with which it was greeted. Since the '50s broadcast television had become the focus of increasing concern for both radical and orthodox sociologists. In sympathy with the theory of

¹ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana, 1974, p 135.

technological determinism, television was scrutinised as the 'cause' of many and various social 'effects'. This period of media theory was strongly influenced by the work of McLuhan and other American formalists who described the inevitable consequences of broadcast technology rather than considering broadcast television from its institutional/industrial base as a producer of ideological representations acting at times in concert with and at times against those of other institutions within the social formation. In these accounts it is the very fact of television which is seen as a problem; the technology is described as necessarily and inevitably producing specific social effects. This debate around the consequences of television was, in fact, part of a general debate which addressed itself to 'mass' communications. Television was seen as the exemplary instance of these new forms of social communication. The criticisms which were levelled at television from both Left and Right shared a mutual base of technologically determinist assumptions. Orthodox views gathered a particular force in the case of the newly emergent forms of youth culture—all of which were attributed to the increasing importance of television as a form of social 'manipulation'. The spread of youth culture was explained as an effect of television which was 'caused' by a process of imitation or role-modelling engendered by the broadcast form. Radical views assigned to television the responsibility for widespread social apathy and described the effects of television as the *embourgeoisement* of the masses. Such explanations inevitably lead to the concentration of political criticism upon the ownership of the means of production and communication. It is not therefore surprising that the new video technology was greeted with celebration. The very fact of video seemed to offer the promise of the inevitable democratisation of the television medium.

Traditional guerilla activity such as bombings, snipings and kidnapping complete with printed manifestos seems like so many risky short-change feedback devices compared with the real possibilities of portable video, maverick data banks, acid metaprogramming, cable tv, satellites, cybernetic craft industries and alternate life-styles.²

North America in the late '60s saw a rapid counter-cultural response to the availability of the new video technology in the form of new media groupings such as Radical Software in New York. These users were well versed in the 'cyberscat' of systems, information and cybernetic theory which they had already harnessed to their critique of dominant cultural forms. The early discourse of North American video was, as a consequence, woven through with a counter-cultural political rhetoric which was to determine strongly both the forms and subject matter of video practice for several years. In Britain a similar situation obtained. Groups such as TVX, set up when video equipment was donated to the Arts Lab in 1968, were to become the Centre for Advanced TV Studies, Fantasy Factory, Graft-ON and a number of community activist organisations.

The revolutionary politics of Britain in '68 tended to focus upon confrontation with the practices, power structures and ideologies of the educational institutions. Significantly for the development of British independent video practice, it was in the art schools that the voices of dissent were most clearly heard. The alternative radical press flourished as new and specific cultural groups sought representation, self-recognition and affirmation. At the same time that students of Guildford and Hornsey Colleges of Art were occupying their colleges and arguing for a restructuring of art education in favour of a network or non-specialist system, the arts themselves were entering a new phase of experimentation and cross-fertilisation.

By the early '70s, modernism had reached its zenith in painting and sculpture. The semiotic shift begun by Cubism's rupture of sign and referent had eventually culminated in the play of pure signifiers free of any signifieds beyond the realm of aesthetics itself. Painting had achieved almost total reflexivity; it spoke only the conditions of its own material existence. Conceptual artists working within the commercial gallery system began to focus attention upon the processes of art production rather than the art object itself. Many claimed a political significance for this work by arguing that it challenged both the art historical and gallery definition of the work as a cultural and marketable commodity. The institutional effect of this shift within avant-garde art practice was rapid. Many galleries adapted their marketing

² Paul Ryan, 'Guerilla Strategy and Cybernetic Theory', *Radical Software*, Spring 1971.

strategies to recuperate these works as saleable commodities. Hence documentation of performance, site-dependent and conceptual art was offered to the collector in the place of the work itself or the collector commissioned an installation for a pre-existing private space.

Many younger and more radical artists felt the need to construct new institutions for the production and exhibition of work as an alternative to the commercial galleries and conventional forms of patronage. Co-operatives and collectives were set up which attempted to represent special interest groups and organise around new notions of the ownership of the means of production, audience/performer relations and the means and forms of distribution. The London Film Makers Co-op, the short lived but highly influential 2B Butlers Wharf group and the Basement Group in Newcastle are three notable examples.

It is at this point that the specific history of video practice in Britain begins to differ significantly from that in the USA. What, in fact, was to determine the specificity of British video was the form of modernism which it took up and developed to its own conclusions.

Modernism

The entanglement of early British video with late modernism requires further elaboration. There was, of course, nothing inevitable about it. Early counter-cultural users had already established their difference from contemporary art ideology by moving towards the conventions (and dominant televisual ideologies) of agit-prop. In Britain avant-garde video never fully identified itself with, or was courted by, the traditional institutions of the commercial art world. Its first practitioners were the very artists who had instigated the development of alternative exhibition spaces. Video technology became available at the moment when traditional categories and definitions were being most forcefully challenged. As a consequence the technology was taken up in a number of hybrid practices such as video/performance in which its role was more of an adjunct to, or expansion of, other media and practices.

Several British artists were, however, devoting themselves almost exclusively to video and they recognised the need for a specific video practice to be developed. It is important to note the

extent to which avant-garde film provided models of organisation for this early attempt to establish video as an autonomous practice. Artist film-makers had been struggling for several years to develop their own practice as an identifiable, autonomous and, most importantly, fundable aesthetic. In the late '60s, as many younger artists began to work outside the commercial gallery structure, the state – in the form of the Arts Council of Great Britain – took on an increasing importance in the funding and exhibition of alternative aesthetic practices. The two most significant new committees were the short-lived Special Projects Committee and the Artists' Film Committee, which was set up in response to increasing pressure from artists working in film for a specialist body apart from that of the visual arts.

Artist video producers formed a pressure group: London Video Arts (LVA), which was to become firstly a distribution library, secondly a regular showing venue in London and finally a production facility. The decision to provide a distribution and exhibition service prior to a production facility points to the importance attached at that time to the circulation of existing work (particularly from abroad) over and above the need to facilitate the production of new work. The decision was entirely pragmatic. Video technology was still developing too rapidly and unevenly for video artists to provide a convincing argument to state funding bodies for the enormous capital funding required to set up a production facility. Production was at least taking place, albeit it within the constraints of the educational institutions.

An aspect of the early membership of LVA which was specific to video was that almost all of the first steering committee members were, or were to become, in some way related to colleges and schools of art. At this time many art colleges were setting up media departments and investing in video technology. This came as a response to both the new developments in cross-fertilisation in the arts and the increasing institutional fascination with new information technology which was making its presence felt in the form of audio-visual aids in media-dependent teaching practices. Early British video therefore became inextricably linked with undergraduate and post-graduate art education, both in terms of its means of production and the development of its aesthetic. One consequence of this institutional

dependency was that avant-garde video found itself face to face with the traditional arts of painting and sculpture. Video not only had to develop its own practices but also had to argue for the aesthetic validity of these practices. If, therefore, video were to develop a modernist practice, it would stand on equal footing with the other traditional art practices. At the same time, however, it would have the advantage of being recognised in its specificity as a result of the modernist concern with the foregrounding of the 'inherent' properties of the medium. Only such a course would guarantee the survival of the current means of production and the future support of the state funding bodies. It was these factors which constituted the conjunctural determination of the specific forms of modernist video.

Late modernism in painting took the form of a reflexivity which excluded all representation or meaning other than that which resulted from the purely formal play of signifiers. Avant-garde film practice had become 'about' acetate, optical reprinting, movement, repetition and duration with an equal stress being placed upon the profilmic event, the process of image production and the projection event itself. In modernist video there was a constant attention paid to the possibilities of the technology and its means of image production. In some senses one can compare such work to modernist work in film in that there is a concentration upon the processes of image production. Yet there are also significant differences between the two media which make the comparison inappropriate. The video image only comes into being at the moment of playback. As a stored image its materiality consists of a complex pattern of invisible electromagnetic charges on a reel of magnetic tape. Modernist work in film involved a direct working upon the image/acetate surface. The encoded video image does not make itself available for such plastic manipulation in its 'pre-projected' form. In the case of video therefore, such interventions can only be made at the level of the technology of image production and reproduction itself. Separate units of image production – camera, recorder, mixer, monitor – can be brought into different and complex relations but the producer is always kept at a distance from the actual electronic processes of image coding and registration. The early practice of video artists can be described as modernist in

that the technology of video was their major preoccupation rather than the world in front of the lens which the medium was developed to reproduce. Video artists' overriding concern was the specificity of the technology – its difference from other mechanical means of image production. Many early works were concerned with the specific effects of light upon the vidicon tube, foregrounding phenomena such as temporary image retention or overdriven automatic exposure controls in order to produce images which uncompromisingly referred the viewer back to the specificity of the technology. As a result of this attempt by video to take up the procedures of modernism there was an inevitable and constant confrontation with illusionism and representation – the very antitheses of the self-referring modernist object. The drive to establish the ontological autonomy of video brought the artists up against issues which constantly displaced the terms of their projects. By attempting to produce a self-reflexive modernist practice, video, in fact, became embroiled within practices of signification. Unlike the media and practices of painting and sculpture, video technology and dominant televisual practices do not 'belong' to the artist. The technology was not developed with him or her in mind and televisual 'literacy' was established and is controlled by the television industry. Video's attempt to produce a modernist practice therefore produced a second unexpected consequence, the establishment of a critical relation to dominant technology and its representational practices.

The curious result of this set of factors was that much early avant-garde video turned the medium away from the world and in upon itself in order to achieve a high level of reflexivity, but then made deeply political claims for its subversion of dominant modes of representation. At the heart of this contradiction lay the seeds of a new oppositional practice.

Recent Video Practice

By the late '70s LVA had established an international library of over two hundred video tapes, developed a small scale production centre in the heart of London's film sector and curated several years of exhibitions on a weekly basis in the Acme and later the AIR galleries in London. Video was by then recognised as a fundable

practice by the Arts Council of Great Britain, which instigated several video fellowships for periods of up to one year at a number of major polytechnic media centres and fine arts media departments. This policy was an attempt to promote video practice without having to invest large amounts of capital funding in a single production centre at a time of state cuts in the Arts Council budget. This funding policy further entangled developing video practice with art college media departments which were by this time more secure—at least as far as their proven aesthetic status was concerned.

In the mid '70s many of these departments had begun to make use of semiotic theory in their daily teaching. The attempt to establish a 'science of signifying practices' was taken up as a theoretical practice to accompany, inform and displace avant-garde film and video practice. The debate that ensued at every level of film and video culture was to result in the rejection of the keystone of modernism—the denial of representation—and the development of modernism's progressive and radical potential. Semiotic theory began to provide the analysis of ideologically dominant televisual practices of representation which would allow video-makers to re-evaluate aspects of modernism and combine them with a new perspective on cultural politics to form the basis of a critical and oppositional practice.

The Women's Movement provided a major political context for such an oppositional practice. The questions that women had been asking for several years tended to concentrate upon issues of representation and the ideological effects upon women's consciousness of dominant media representations of femininity. Feminist analysis suggested that power structures and practices of representation were inextricably linked and that the ideological had a specific effectivity which helped to mask contradictions within the social formation. Such observations led to the notion of a cultural politics which would demand interventions at the ideological level in order to deconstruct the fictional worlds constructed by dominant modes of representation. At an institutional level such interventionist strategies involved the setting up of new distribution organisations such as Circles (which places women's film and video work in distribution).

It was becoming increasingly clear to LVA that, in order to establish institutional autonomy and to maintain independent distribution and exhibition outlets, it must sever its dependency upon the infrastructural support of the educational institutions. These shifts took place over several years. In a sense they came about as a result of slow realisations rather than a consciously planned policy. Nevertheless, they do represent a steady turning away from the dominant institutions of art production and consumption towards new forms and definitions more appropriate to a newly developing practice.

These institutional shifts were accompanied by a complementary development of video practice itself. It would be inappropriate to attempt to characterise the heterogeneous body of work making up recent video practice but two general observations can be made. Firstly, as video began to develop an autonomous practice its identification with fine art values became less relevant; secondly, the critical relationship to dominant televisual ideology became more acute. To a great extent these two characteristics of recent work can be related to the interrogation of the modernist aesthetic and a re-evaluation of its potentially radical aspects. In its most radical instances, late modernism sought to deny the notion of the author as the transcendental source of the work's meaning. It consequently detached itself from conventional art historical models of creativity and the ultimate expression of this creativity in the form of the masterpiece. Marks of authorship were expelled with the signified. This radical suppression of the author had as its concomitant a foregrounding of those aspects of a work which constituted it as a cultural text. The term 'intertextuality' describes this cross-referencing of aesthetic texts which tends to challenge the uniqueness of the individual art object. In recent video practice this quality of intertextuality allows the work to be read in terms of its cultural and ideological resonances rather than in its capacity to 'represent' the consciousness of its author. It becomes evident that the meaning of a work is precisely a social construction.

Recent video practice has not given up modernism's reflexive separation of signifier and signified in order to re-instate the regimes of Realism and Representationalism. Modernism extruded the signified. Recent practice has re-

introduced it, but displaced it in its 'natural' relation to the signifier in order to understand better the ideological effects of dominant televisual forms. This relationship of signifier to signified has been reconstructed cautiously and problematically to demonstrate that no meaning is given or natural but is, instead, the product of a signifying practice. The world is not reflected in the practice of representation but is rather seen to be a product of it.

For the last ten years the two major independent video communities – video artists and social action/agit-prop video workers – have been separated by major ideological differences. In Britain this gap is now beginning to close as community video workers increasingly question dominant televisual forms and video artists loosen their historical ties with modernism and

begin to embrace issues of social and political relevance. It is also becoming evident that the historical distance between independent film and video producers is beginning to close as filmmakers learn more about the history of video practice and recognise that many of the debates within the independent film community have also taken place within the video community. It is important that these dialogues continue and that an institutional consolidation takes place at a time when the independent sector becomes increasingly subject to political scrutiny and the withdrawal of state funding.

This article is based on the introduction to the catalogue for the show on recent British video which was presented at the Kitchen Centre, New York, in May 1983 with the assistance of the British American Arts Association and the British Council.

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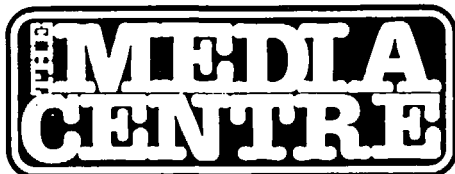
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CASUAL PRODUCTION

PAT SWEENEY REPORTS FROM A FESTIVAL OF INDEPENDENT VIDEO

The arrival of the camcorder, the new portable combined video camera and recorder, on Britain's high streets in the course of 1984, confirmed the casualisation of video production. Access to video equipment is easier than it has ever been, and one increasingly popular way to earn some cash-in-hand, to supplement the dole or a taxed wage, is to buy a video camera and record weddings, parties and the like, for the amusement and no doubt bemusement of posterity. In time, the camcorder will no doubt become as prevalent as the instamatic camera, and the VCR will increasingly function as the host for home-produced tapes.

The Fifth National Festival of Independent Video, held at South Hill Park Arts Centre in Bracknell from November 23 to 25, 1984, illustrated the increasing variety and quantity of this casual production, while marking the maturity of the industrialisation of the access and workshop model. (The latter had, in the seventies, been defined by the fact that it was casual: workers were unwaged, project limited to specific tapes, funding limited to product, and the equipment was generally of domestic rather than industrial standard.¹)

Almost 300 tapes were submitted to the festival which, given the fact that publicity was largely limited to the pages of *Independent Video*¹, a magazine with a circulation of 800, represented an extraordinary response. Barry Gibson, one of the festival organisers, estimated that submissions had increased by 50% on the previous year.

'Casual' is one of the determining mythologies of the contemporary cultural landscape and video 'scratch', one of its most potent manifestations, was much in evidence at the festival. 'Casual', in the widest sense of the term, denotes those cultural or entrepreneurial activities, wherein

people get even, rather than angry, with the Crisis of Fordism, i.e., by dressing in expensive leisure and sportswear, break-dancing in the ghetto, pirating films on video, and working 'casually'—without contracts or taxation. 'Casual' denotes the whole range of activities which signify people as 'fronting' out the recession rather than complying with its negative social verdict, and sinking into despair and apathy.

It is, of course, little more than an attitude hyped into a mythology, and 'scratching', which marries hi-tech with a Do-It-Yourself punk ethic, is a cultural practice whose reasons for existence are often more interesting than the existences it enjoys. 'Casual' and 'scratch' are partly mythological because their actual manifestations rarely realise the cultural significance and social subversiveness accorded to them; 'scratching' is rarely done by working-class kids on home video recorders, as legend has it, but is the preserve of art students, or people with access to downtime facilities houses.

Video art, in fact, was born in the act of purloining images from broadcast television: to that extent 'scratch' has always been central to video activism. Today's efforts are differentiated from previous work with off-air images because of the general absence of any critical relationship with the parent medium, a relationship which was dominant in the '70s. Contemporary scratching does not critically interrogate the images it liberates, it uses them to formulate new meanings or simply to create pleasurable sequences of images.

Music is crucial to the new scratch ethic and one of the most successful examples featured at the festival was provided by the Duvet Brothers: Rik Lander and Peter Boyd. Their scratch of *Blue Monday* by New Order took its cue from the song's title, counterpointing images of the Conservative Party, the miners' strike, nuclear weapons, and the aristocracy at play. The ideal of new scratch is the coupling of the visual and

¹ See special issue of *Independent Video* on 'Community Video', November 1983.

musical rhythm achieved by the Duvet Brothers, in their synchronising of images of nuclear missiles soaring from their bunkers with the beat of the song's metronomic pulse.

Peter Savage's *Back After The Break* was a more traditional and discursive reworking of the scratch ethic, which redeployed images of women on broadcast television, to undermine the social text those images collectively construct.

The concept of scratch has inspired more than its fair share of specious rhetoric. To laud the process, as some do, as one which repossesses the image—as though there were a nature outside the culture of broadcast television to which the image could be returned—ignores the fact that such work achieves its best effects when it playfully disrupts the original meaning of an image by (dis)locating it in a novel context. As such, scratch is basically a form of visual punning, and accordingly desperately post-modern.

Mark Wilcox's *Calling the Shots*, which won the Television South Award for Best Student Video of 1984, created a series of puns on a social/sexual encounter between Lana Turner and John Gavin in Douglas Sirk's 1959 melodrama—*Imitation of Life*. The combination of scratch techniques with another parodic meditation on soap opera, on the face of it, did not invite any great excitement, particularly since Sirk's films, one would have thought, are among the least predictable within the genre of melodrama, with *Imitation of Life* a typically complex fusion of the conventional—the clash of ambition and love—and the unconventional—the problem of racism and identity.

Notwithstanding such unpromising foundations, *Calling the Shots* hit most of its targets with the kind of force and accuracy which reminded the audience why the shots had been worth firing in the first place. A crucial scene in the film involves John Gavin telling Lana Turner of his ambition to have his photographs hung in the Museum of Modern Art. This scene is restaged by two contemporary actors and intercut with the original to great comic effect. Their reinterpretations foreground the relationship of power and submission latent in the original scene, gradually reducing the seductive technicolour romantic/sexual encounter to the level of the grotesque and the absurd. One short, in particular, when the woman winks in greatly exaggerated slow motion, introduces an

image of female lewdness which detonates the gender myths of melodrama.

After the effects of Thatcherism, and the prospect of the holocaust, the cultural politics of sexuality and its social effects are the subjects which most preoccupy young video-makers. *Calling the Shots* cleverly unmasks the power relationships inherent in conventional heterosexual interaction without proposing any alternatives to those structures. Arguably, much post-Lacanian discourse on sexuality, so often compelled to posit a no man's land between the phallic dystopia of the given and the utopia of a post-phallic sexuality, tends to provoke the stance of cool and knowing neutrality manifested by this tape.

The Lacanian episteme—in the shape of such concepts as desire, loss, abandon, death, ecstasy, possession—dominated the predominantly visual landscape of Kim Flitcroft and Sandra Goldbacher's *Night of a Thousand Eyes*. Presented, and in some quarters received, as a post-feminist representation of heterosexual desire, the tape is as problematic as it is ambitious. The video's impact is visceral, its appeal tactile—facts which uneasily accommodate the theoretical observations on sexuality which are supposed to sustain the riot of image and rhythm it generates. In fact, the tape refers back to its own sexuality far more successfully than it does to any larger polity of discourse. If it is a triumph it is because it is sexual-in-itself—pleasurable, stimulating, disorientating and uncertain. If it is a failure, it is because it is not sufficiently organ-ised to clarify the questions of sexuality which it seeks to address. A flawed text or an engaging experience, however one finally judges the tape, *Night of a Thousand Eyes* makes most British video art look anemic, anodyne and unadventurous.

In 1983 video art was cordoned off from the rest of the festival under the title 'Beyond Narrative'. In 1984 the casual and industrial models of access video production were mixed together. The industrialisation of independent video production, established by the Workshop Declaration, bore dramatic fruit in the course of 1984 in the form of the *Coal Not Dole* tapes: a series of eight short tapes which presented the miners' views of the industrial struggle in which they were engaged. The resources of workshops and access facilities houses across the country were co-ordinated for this project by Christopher



Kim Flitcroft and Sandy Goldbacher's *Night of a Thousand Eyes*.

Reeve and Derek Friedman of Platform Films in London, and Stewart MacKinnon of Trade in Newcastle, producing approximately 30,000 copies of the eight tapes which have been distributed all over the country, in Europe and North America.

The tapes were designed, in the words of Chris Reeve, 'to harden up the resolve of those miners who were ambiguous in their support for the strike, secondly, to win the support and consolidate the solidarity of other unions'. The tapes proved the existence of a production and distribution infrastructure which by-passes broadcast television and public exhibition centres. Of course it required a crisis to galvanise the individual workshops into concerted action, but since it proved the feasibility of such a project, one can anticipate further extension and consolidation of the network in the future.

The two tapes from the series screened at the Bracknell festival dealt with the media and the policing of the strike. *Only Doing Their Job? Police, Law and The Miners*, at 27 minutes running time, was the longest tape in the series, and also the most radical. The tape deals with the radicalisation of miners' attitudes due to their experience of police tactics during the dispute. Members of mining communities, both men and women, drew parallels between their own

experiences and those of the Irish in Ulster, Asians in Bradford, Afro-Caribbean youths in Brixton, explaining that the strike has caused them to question and discard some of their most fundamental attitudes about British society and its mythical support of fairness, justice, impartiality and compromise.

Trade unions in the course of 1984 displayed an increasing awareness of the benefits of video, both to counter the growing tide of management video, and to address contemporary social issues. The Trade Union Resource Centre in Birmingham, under the direction of Chris Rushton, has been a prime mover in this process, and the festival featured an excellent TURC video on the Youth Training Scheme entitled *Rights Wot Rights*.

The Trade Films group were featured in the shape of a characteristically humane and humanistic documentary on the life, agitation, and struggles of Harriet Vyse, a shop steward at Plessey's in Sunderland during the '60s and '70s. Their native North-East has now, perhaps, the highest concentration of film and video workshops in the country: Trade, Amber, Swingbridge Video, Project's UK, and the Northern Film and Video Archive. Ingrid Sinclair, a member of the Trade Collective, explained to the festival that plans are currently

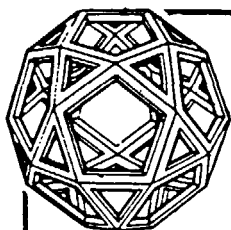
76 underway to 'create a production infrastructure for the entire region by co-ordinating the resources of all the existing workshops and projects'. Tyne and Wear council, aware of the potential career opportunities for local youth, have provided a £20,000 grant to conduct a feasibility study of the possibility of developing a North-East Media Development Council. The council, it is proposed, would co-ordinate resources to develop a video and television production base, and provide a studio which would offer training facilities and broadcast local television programmes, perhaps via satellite to SAMTV systems. 'The council', Sinclair added, 'will also help to prevent the North-East's production houses being picked off one by one.'

Approximately 260 people attended the Independent Video festival, again a substantial increase on the previous year, though representatives from the British Film Institute, the Arts Council, the ACTT, and Channel 4 were conspicuous by their absence – a fact which David Stewart, one of the festival organisers, saw 'as symptomatic of the fact that the major funding bodies continue to remain preoccupied with cultural artefacts to the exclusion of cultural

practice'.

An interesting fact emerged from the record of ticket sales: more than half the audience were unemployed. For these people, video is above all cultural practice, one which puts some flesh on the glib phraseology of the leisure society, offers possible job opportunities or at the very least provides the chance to do something constructive and creative.

The *Coal Not Dole* tapes and the plans for a Northern Media Development Council confirmed the shift of the community video sector from casual to industrial modes of production, suggesting that yesterday's video activist has become today's cultural entrepreneur. The festival, at times, hinted at an emerging division between the entrepreneurs and the new generation of video activists. But the real problem is that the proliferation of needs manifested by both the industrial and casual sectors is taking place against the background of shrinking resources, suggesting, finally, that Thomas Hobbes, not Marshall McLuhan, is the spiritual godfather of independent video activity in Britain in the mid-'80s.



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MUSIC VIDEO: INDUSTRIAL PRODUCT, CULTURAL FORM

BY DAVE LAING

'Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?' was the response of Hollywood producer Harry Warner to the news that sound had been successfully added to moving pictures. 'Who the hell wants to see a record?' has been the response of many audiophiles to the advent of music video in the past few years. Behind this attitude is a notion of the purity of a single-sense experience (hearing unalloyed by sight) which recalls the hostility shown to the sound film by many eminent critics and theorists of the silent cinema.

In the case of music, Alan Durant has pointed out how recent is the idea of it as purely an auditory experience: 'Other than in the twentieth century on radio and disc, music has been most widely experienced in forms of relationship with a pleasure of seeing, and so radio and records were quite fundamental innovations as regards listening. . . .'¹ Historically, music video can be understood not so much as an innovation but as a return to the main tradition of musical experience.

Whether or not music video, like talking pictures, will brush aside the protests of its critics is not the concern of this article. Nevertheless, two points which indicate the likelihood of its longevity can be made here. The first is that even popular recorded music has never had a pristine existence as pure sound. A visual component has always been in evidence, however faintly. The iconography of the star image, imagined or before the listener on the album sleeve, was one source. Another was the visual connotations of certain musical signifiers,

such as pizzicato strings suggesting rain or tears. Like the sound effects or the live music that invariably accompanied silent films, these aspects to some degree prefigured the union of recorded sound and vision.

Secondly, music video has appeared at a time when fundamental changes are being worked through at both the economic and technological levels in the sphere of recorded music. Further, music video can be seen to embody in its evolution the sometimes contradictory responses of the various interests in the music industry to those changes. This article is intended to locate music video as a putative cultural form within the development of both audio and video production, and to describe its present economic position as part of the audio-visual industries as a whole.

The novelty of music video means that few statistics on the size of the field are available. One estimate is that in 1984, the total outlay on music video production in the United Kingdom came to £12 million.² This was spent on perhaps 800 or so short productions, each forming the visiontrack to a single song or musical piece. Estimates of domestic production in other European countries tended to reflect the international balance of forces in the popular music field. The French and German output was somewhere over 100 each, the Netherlands produced 35 and Norway and Spain only a handful.

An estimated 1500 to 2000 music videos were produced in the United States in 1984, and that country now has several national and over a dozen local cable television channels exclusively devoted to music video running 24 hours a day. The first of these to be established, MTV (Music Television) is a joint venture between American Express and Warner Communications. Its most

¹ Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music*, London, Macmillan 1984, p 89.

² *Music Week*, October 6, 1984, p 14.

recent figures, covering the first nine months of 1984, saw an increase in advertising revenue of 200% compared to the same period of 1983. That income was 49.6 million dollars, with a reported profit for MTV of 14 million dollars.

In Britain, there are now some 300 'long-form' music videotapes available to buy or rent. These are programmes with running times of anything above the average audio album length of 40 minutes. They account for some 5% of the available catalogue of prerecorded videocassettes. Of the 300, over half are simply films of live concerts and only about 18% can be said to be 'original' long-form videos. The remainder consist of compilations of the short one-song music videos or re-releases of television shows.

Opinion on the industrial and commercial future of music video is divided. While one US forecast predicted that it would account for 25% of the cassettes bought or rented for home viewing within a few years, others have pointed to the low sales figures for 'long-form' programmes so far. For, while *Making Michael Jackson's Thriller* has now sold over 750,000 copies worldwide, most music videos are in the 30,000 or below bracket.

The more pessimistic predictions, however, tend to reflect the confused manner in which music video has been developed until now, rather than any inherent limitations of the form. For music video, even more than the audio recording industry's current state-of-the-art playback technology, the compact disc, represents a new phase of development for sound recording as a cultural form.

To justify that claim, it is necessary to recapitulate the history of sound recording. As a cultural industry, it took shape in the closing years of the nineteenth century, on the model of so many industries of that period. Often called 'mass production', this—as Raymond Williams has argued—should more precisely be termed 'multiple serial production'. Like the book and newspaper industries of the period, the record industry was engaged in the manufacture and the marketing of large numbers of identical commodities for sale to individuals for domestic consumption. In this perspective, the compact disc (despite its undoubted technical improvements) represents the latest stage in the sound recording industry's attempt to maintain itself as primarily a 'multiple serial production' manufacturing industry.

The term 'primarily' is used here because since the '20s sound recordings have been disseminated and consumed in other ways than as retail commodities. Various new uses of recorded music have appeared alongside and even in direct competition with the simple cash-nexus of buying and selling black discs.

The first of these, in the 1920s, was radio broadcasting. The wireless medium found in recorded music an ideal source of programme material. And with the arrival of the Depression at the end of the decade, sales of radio sets were maintained while sales of discs dropped—dramatically in the USA and considerably in Europe. Partly as a result, composers, record companies and performers fought to establish the right of payment for the broadcasting and other public performances of recordings. The results were uneven: in some countries, only composers gained an income from broadcasting, while in others that income was shared with one or both of the other copyright owners.

Income from broadcasting has become an important part of music industry economics: in 1983, United Kingdom payments from radio and TV for the right to use recorded music totalled over £7 million. There is, however, another new use of music which is arguably more important than broadcasting, from which the copyright owners in most countries obtain no income at all. This is home taping, or private copying.

The technology which enables such copying to take place was first of all used in the production of studio recordings. The development of magnetic tape both enhanced the quality and fidelity of recorded sound and allowed for the detailed editing of recordings. Previously, all sound recordings had been made in uninterruptable takes, so that the best overall take would be chosen for release. Now, elements from different performances could be edited together on tape.

When cassette tapes replaced reel-to-reel formats and cassette recorders and players were marketed as consumer goods in the 1960s, this new medium of home entertainment allowed consumers to acquire copies of sound recordings without going through (and paying at) retail outlets. Records could now be copied directly and quickly onto tape without serious loss of quality.

In the UK, home taping is in breach of copyright law, although that law is clearly

80 unenforceable. After campaigning *against* private copying ('Home Taping Is Killing Music'), music industry organisations have now adopted the position that, like broadcasting, home taping must be accepted as another established use of copyright material. Therefore, they argue that it should also be paid for, through a royalty levied on recording hardware and on blank cassette tapes.

But such has been the rate of innovation in what might be called domestic entertainment modes that no sooner had the sound recording industry arrived at a strategy towards audio taping, then a new mode appeared to threaten the position of recorded music within popular consumer culture.

That position had in any case not been central since the '50s and the arrival of television. TV had directly displaced radio as a cultural form, and partially displaced the record player. The latter, however, still retained two advantages, one negative and one positive. Negatively, it was not inevitably a 'family' medium. Television had been established in both the United States and Europe as a cultural medium aimed at a single, monolithic audience, whose common denominator was that mythic unit, the 'family'. With the bulk of its programming geared to address and to position viewers as unified families, it was almost guaranteed to antagonise many adolescents whose impulse was to stress the differences between themselves and their parents.

The record player was the medium through which such listeners could slip out of a family role, and, in the '50s, into rock and roll. It seemed to provide the listener with a control not available to the television viewer. That listener could determine the programming instead of being subject to the scheduling of broadcasting organisations.

From this perspective, the swift growth in the numbers of videocassette recorders in Europe (and now the United States) can be seen to be due to something more than its technological novelty or the sophistication of advertising campaigns. The additional element lies in the VCR's combining of elements previously found in either television or in the record or audio-cassette player. Linked to TV by its use of the small screen and of the audio-visual mode, the VCR nevertheless is 'like' the cassette recorder in its ability to offer choice and control. It can tape

pre-recorded or broadcast material and play it back as well as play commercially marketed recorded material distributed through retail networks. From the point of view of the evolution of domestic entertainment, then, home video has both reiterated and gone beyond key elements of pre-existing systems.

As video cassette recorders were sold and rented in greater numbers and sales of blank tapes took off, the income of the music industry dropped. Obviously this was not the only cause of that decline in the late '70s: the acceleration in home audio taping and the general economic depression played their part. But there was a significant resemblance to the events of the first great Depression. In the late '20s, radio thrived at the expense of records because it was a medium that did not require the frequent outlay of fairly large amounts of cash. The position of video as it developed as a domestic entertainment medium – its basis in rental and in broadcasting (through so-called time-shifting) and the absurdly low charge for film rental – was similar.

One reason for the coming of music video, then, was perhaps a defensive move by the sound recording industry, to get in on this new competitor for consumer attention. But there is another basis for the rendezvous of recorded music with film and video. For at least three decades, the dominant mode of popular music has been the studio recording, however it has been disseminated or distributed. The hegemony of the recording has been achieved at the expense of the live performance to the extent that audiences for rock music frequently attend concerts expecting to hear the sound of the artists' recordings reproduced in a live setting. Reciprocally, concert tours are often organised to coincide with the release of albums, as much as advertisements for recordings as events in their own right.

As reviewers have been quick to recognise, there is at an aesthetic level something paradoxical or self-defeating in this attempt to re-create a recorded sound in a live context, rather like Borges' tale of Pierre Menard, who devoted his life to (re-) writing *Don Quixote* in exactly the same words as Cervantes'. Such rock aesthetes of course are perhaps too captivated by the notions of 'live' and 'spontaneous', whereas the ticket-buying fans attend mainly to savour the performance-image of the musicians. Nevertheless, when this amalgam of studio

sound and live performance is transferred to television, the mismatch is very evident, notably in the practice of 'lip-synching'.

This is the form of miming carried out by artists on hit parade programmes like the BBC's *Top Of The Pops*, where artists 'perform' their recordings. At best, this practice gives scope for transgressive behaviour when musicians refuse to conform and fail to lip synch or 'play' their instruments in the right places.

To import terms from other cultural forms, what results is a clash between the *naturalistic* visuals (the image of the live performance) and the *constructed* character of studio-produced sound. As if in recognition of this, the television practice developed of matching sound recordings with equally constructed visuals. Many of these visual tracks (like those of the Beatles' singles) featured the artists concerned – though not only (or at all) as live performers – but others attached quite other visual material. The BBC 2 rock programme, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, began to add extracts from cartoon or silent comedy films to album tracks. These were among the original forms of music video.

Put like that, the arrival of music video can be seen as a kind of necessary evolution of cultural forms, as, with hindsight, some historians have made the arrival of the talkies in the cinema to have been. In the case of music video, the story is of discovery of a fully appropriate visual mode to complement an existing and varied aural one.

The real history of music video, however, does not have the simplicity of such a scenario. The most important fact of that history is that all involved in music video – performers, directors, record companies, broadcasters – could not for a long while see it as in any sense autonomous. Music videos were instead seen as (and called) promotional videos, as pictures to sell records. This had three important consequences: first, the visuals were inevitably subordinated to the soundtrack, which they were there to sell; second, music video as a medium for marketing immediately inherited an aesthetic and a set of techniques from the pre-existing and highly developed form of television commercials; finally, the promotional status of the videos meant that they were initially provided free to broadcasters by the record companies, so that performers, composers and producers were unable to gain income from them as they did from the broadcasting of sound recordings.

All these consequences are interlinked, and for music video to develop its potential as a cultural form in its own right, all will have to be overcome or superseded. Here, however, I will deal only with the third, the economic issue.

The first point at which money changed hands for music video followed the arrival of a new medium for its transmission – a specialist music channel on cable television in the USA. MTV (Music Television) was a joint venture of Warner Communications and American Express, set up in 1981. Currently it supplies a 24 hour service to cable operators whose combined subscriber lists amount to over ten million. In December 1984, MTV saw off the challenge from CMC (Cable Music Channel), a project of Ted Turner, pioneer of 24 hour cable news channels in America. CMC folded after only a few weeks.

The new technologies of satellite and cable broadcasting have opened up the possibility of similar specialised programming for sports, movies and news. As if to emphasise how much this undermines the traditional family orientation of network television, there is even in America a cable service devoted to 'programmes the whole family can watch together': the Disney Channel. For music, MTV and similar projects have enabled broadcast TV to emulate both sound recordings and music video in escaping from the monolithic positioning of a single global audience.

But there was one precedent for MTV within broadcasting itself: the all-music radio stations which had flourished in the period following the eclipse of generic radio programming by family-orientated television. From radio, MTV borrowed the playlist concept, by which music videos are classified into six groups, a process which determines how many times they are programmed each week. MTV also has its V-Js, following radio's disc-jockeys.

The use of the radio model had a vital economic consequence. In the USA radio stations using records pay only the composers' organisations for the right to programme them. Performers and producers receive nothing. This effectively fixed the economic relation between music video producers and television stations. The videos were free programming, for which the producers were to expect only increased sound recording sales as recompense.

In order to develop as a cultural form, any practice needs to have a certain economic

82 autonomy. While it remains dependent or parasitic on something else, it remains limited, doomed to a one-dimensional existence. The clearest example in the audio-visual field is the advertising film. Equally important is the fact that the prominence given to the promotional role in music video effectively prevents performers, composers and video directors from deriving income from music video commensurate with the success of the work. The record company as music video producer can argue that this is a promotional tool, as much as a magazine advertisement for which no contributor receives royalties.

Nevertheless, the sheer cost of making music videos meant that even the producers' commitment to the promotional role was less than wholehearted. As had happened previously with radio, it was clear that music video was a popular source of programming which enabled the TV channels to attract advertising and make profits.

MTV itself eventually started to make payments to record companies, though not on a pay-for-use basis. Instead the formula was that of an 'exclusivity pact'. Under this, the record companies continued to supply music videos free of charge, but in return for a fee from MTV, they guaranteed that channel the exclusive use of certain films for periods of up to 30 days.

Other music channels, however, have adopted payment for use systems. The shortlived CMC operated in this way, as do Music Box and the Sky Channel in Europe. These are two UK-based programmers, owned respectively by a consortium including Thorn-EMI and Virgin, and by Rupert Murdoch. Using satellite transmissions, they supply programmes to cable systems in at least nine European countries.

The economic 'autonomy' of music video has also been advanced by the growing release of pre-recorded cassettes for sale or rental of collections of video singles by various artists or by individual groups, as well as a few video releases based on whole albums. The most ambitious to date is Barry Gibb's *Now, Voyager*, produced by PolyGram Music Video (PMV) with a budget of over a million dollars.

Insofar as music video develops an economic autonomy comparable with that of recorded music or video as such, the current division of income from music video will undoubtedly change. At present, record companies tend to

retain a monopoly of copyright, with the other participants – video production companies, musicians, actors, composers – getting either a fee or nothing at all. Already, in some countries, the composers have negotiated a royalty rate for music video, while the Musicians Union in the UK has a session fee agreement with the record industry and the US Screen Actors Guild has announced its intention of seeking improved rates for music video work. But the most crucial future role may well be that of the video director, whose current relationship to his or her product is equivalent to that of the advertising film director. There may soon be a shift towards a status similar to that of a record producer, a number of whom receive royalties on album sales.

The final issue to consider in this survey of the music video field is the role of independent production within it. Is there a space for independents in a sphere apparently dominated by the needs and priorities of market-orientated major record companies?

Although it may seem heretical to suggest it, music video seems to be an example of a situation where initiatives taken by major institutions in a cultural industry have the effect of opening up a space for independent activity. The compact disc is another instance where research expenditure by Japanese and European multinationals has produced a technology which is increasingly used by small record companies, particularly those specialising in classical music.

In the case of music video, the majors have established a demand from broadcasters and from consumers which independent musicians and film-makers can take advantage of. In addition, music video should be seen as a component of any independent activity in the cable broadcasting field. In fact, the role of such video work was discussed in some depth in the report on the future of local media commissioned by the Greater London Council and Sheffield City Council in 1983³.

Perhaps the main problem to be faced by independent music video producers in gaining access to broadcast television will be the familiar one of 'professional' production values, the lack of which has often been used as a reason to bar

³ *Cable: Report on GLC/Sheffield City Council Hearings*, July 1983.

independent work from the screen in the past. Here, though, video can learn from music. For much of the punk rock movement was about the

rejection of professionalism and over-elaborate and highly-expensive production methods. In its turn, music video may have its punk revolution.

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BOX POP

SEAN CUBITT PREVIEWS A SEFT EVENT ON MUSIC VIDEO

The popular song is produced in a discourse of pleasurable tensions – between the diatonics of European classical tradition and the modal forms of folk songs and the blues; between novelty and formula; between the cyclical time of the beat and the linear time of the melody; between written tunes and improvisational traditions. The song, which has been the dominant form of popular music for at least the last century, operates its own form of identification, at the privileged site of the singing voice. Melody operates like narrative, creating pleasurable anxieties, tensions and resolutions. Identification with the singing voice, and by extension with the singer, is the listener's point of entry into the 'narrative' flow of the tune.

The advent of recording alters the terms under which the popular song circulates. Prime industrial forms of circulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the sale of sheet music for mass markets, begin to take second place to the consumption of recorded music. Not musical notation but the recording itself becomes *the* written form of music, in the sense of that which supplements the 'original', disturbing the priority of 'live' performance and ultimately becoming an art in its own right – as with the great auteurs of record production, Phil Spector, Leonard Chess, Mickey Most, Trevor Horn. Music becomes, with recording, capable of infinite reproduction and repetition. And with this step, music loses its 'aura', as Benjamin would have said. It becomes first and foremost a writing: first recording and only then performance. This can be read as a function of the factory model of production applied to a cultural form, typical of the trend in post-war capital towards the commodification of culture and information. But it can also be read as a process geared towards the production of

difference. Those of us who grew up with the Beatles and the Stones, with Stax/Volt and Tamla Motown, remember how cultural choices – the choice of which music to consume – were a central part in our sense of identity, in our cultural formation, and in the formation of senses of our race, gender, age group, class and sexual identity. Music offered, and offers, ways of playing out the tensions of that process of cultural formation, especially in young teens.

Music video, in a variety of ways, offers resolutions to the tensions created in music, and creates new ones of its own. As Dave Laing's article in this issue demonstrates, music video is tied to the same processes of production as the music industry, to international flows of cultural products, to factory production, to specific markets. Bounded by the production of youth and anarchy in pop discourses on the one hand, and by the institutional discourses of television on the other, video strives for excess and for subversion without leaving the bounds of the familiar. It is thus bound into familiar narrative structures as a way of raising and then exorcising the ghosts of teenage rebellion. And as with audio recording, video recording is a writing: the scanning lines on the TV screen are the mark of the difference between screen image and 'the real thing'. And yet, as a writing, the video image is divorced from its 'origin'. As Dave Laing points out in this issue, much of the popular criticism of the form centres on the way the image is supposed to pre-empt the free play of the imagination around music. I think that in many ways this is the intention behind many videos – to contain and resolve the tensions generated in the music – to create a totality which can embrace all the meanings of the song into a single whole. It is doomed to failure, as Mick Eaton's film *Frozen Music* says of the similar totalising

attempt of the Albert Memorial: the attempt to produce an allegory which will hold and control the meanings circulating about a particular form, be it a statue or a song, will always produce even more polysemous effects than the palimpsest on which they base their commentaries.

Video is also bounded by institutions: the industry (programme, programme flow, good taste and decency, and – particularly in the case of video – the programme segment) and the viewing situation (the family, the domestic, the intrusion of the everyday into the living room – or the pubs and clubs with their own discourses and practices). Within these constraints, music video can never be excessive: it can only represent excess, inside the television-as-furniture, behind the glass. So it is that music video strains to represent community, not family, as the goal of narrative – a utopia without adults, an assembly of the like-minded. And thus we are not drawn, as with the song as an audio-recorded form, into the diegesis, but are placed outside it as the viewers looking in (just as early radio audiences were referred to as 'listeners-in'). Music video is to the pop song what television is

to film: it places us outside the text looking in, rather than stitching us elaborately into the fabric of the text.

It's in these terms that questions about the nature and function of music video can be raised with a view to a political understanding of their problems. One of music video's prime attractions is its deployment of avant-garde techniques: but the industrial uses of video must make us ask whether those techniques are necessarily positive in and of themselves. How does pastiche function in video: as reflexivity or plagiarism, subversion or comforting familiarity? Is the dislocation of diegesis and soundtrack threatening or titillating? How useful are the scopophilic analyses familiar from film theory to televisual media? How can we speak of fetishistic looking when the audience is represented to itself as audience; how pure is the voyeuristic pleasure which is constantly intercut with the knowing glance to camera?

'Box Pop', a discussion event on music video to be held at Newcastle Polytechnic and Tyneside Cinema on March 23, is a new departure for SEFT. We will be advertising as

BOX POP

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MUSIC VIDEOS:

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How do they work?
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Who controls them?
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Speakers include Angela McRobbie, Kathy Myers, Dave Laing, Stuart Cosgrove, Peter Packer, Hugh Kelly, Mark Hustwitt, Sheryl Garratt, Dessi Fox...

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BOX POP

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widely as funds will allow, and hoping to draw on the huge numbers of people who watch, enjoy and criticise music videos as a key part of their involvement in cultural practice. We are inviting journalists, teachers and video-makers to lead workshops rather than to present papers. Both of these factors come from a belief in two things – the fundamental intelligence of audiences, an intelligence usually denied them in right-wing and liberal discourses about the media; and a belief that video is an active verb (Latin, 'I see'), and that the central role in that activity is played not by the text but by the viewer. The literary strands that flowed into the formation of film studies in most of the Anglo-Saxon world have enshrined textuality as the object of its study. It

is a concept shrouded in all the miasmas of 'tradition', 'permanence' and 'ars gratia artis' (to cite the Decadent motto of MGM). Video is ephemeral. When it returns, as in compilation tapes from sixties pop shows or 'Greatest Hits' collections, it returns in another form, waiting to be 'read' in new ways. And because it is a writing, it contains from the first the germ of its own repetition: as such it is radically incomplete. Even more than film, video doesn't offer an experience but a plurality of possible ones, which will differ by race and age, class and gender, even by the company in which they are watched. I hope that in Newcastle we will see an equally complex and challenging exchange.

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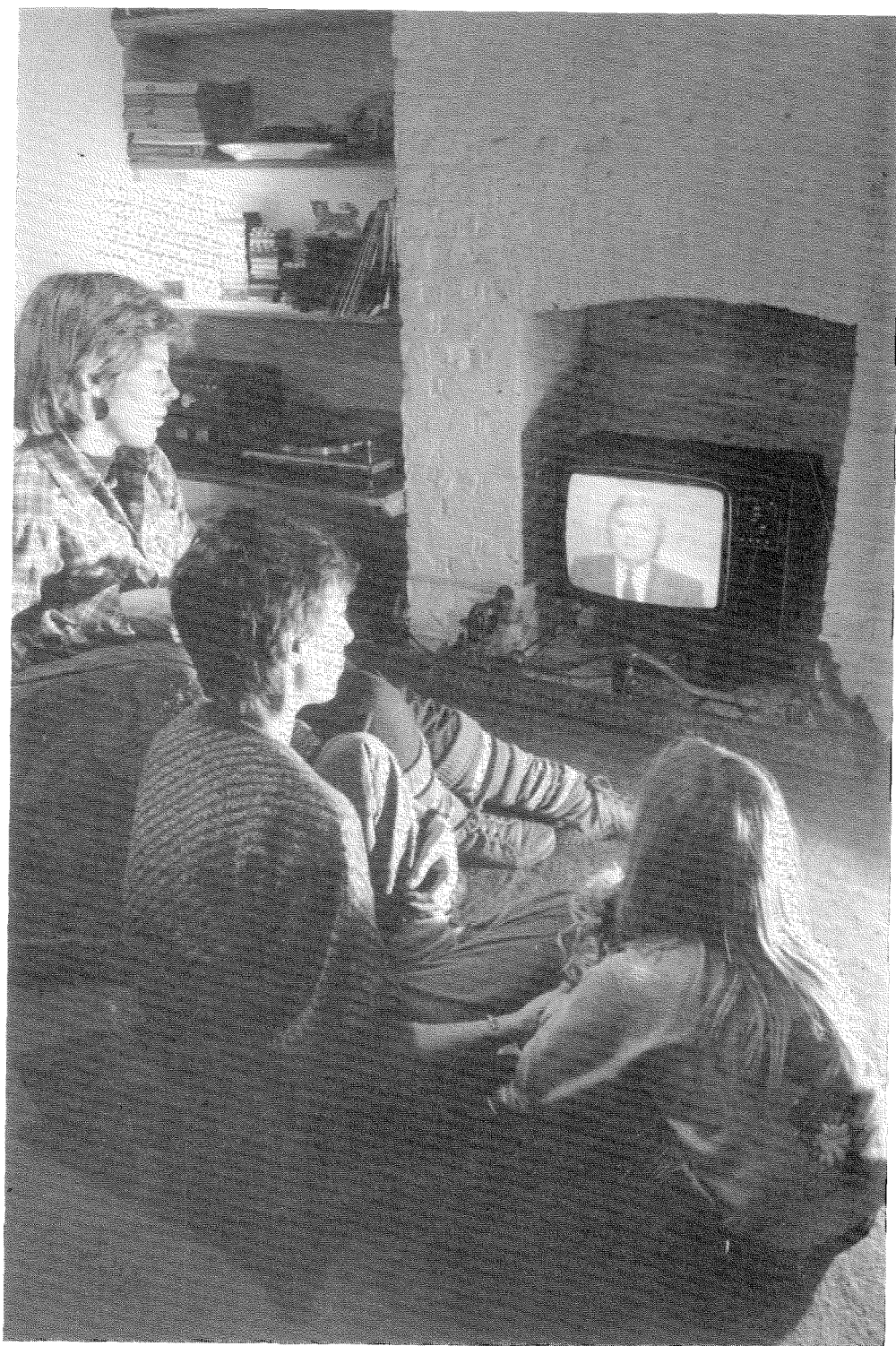
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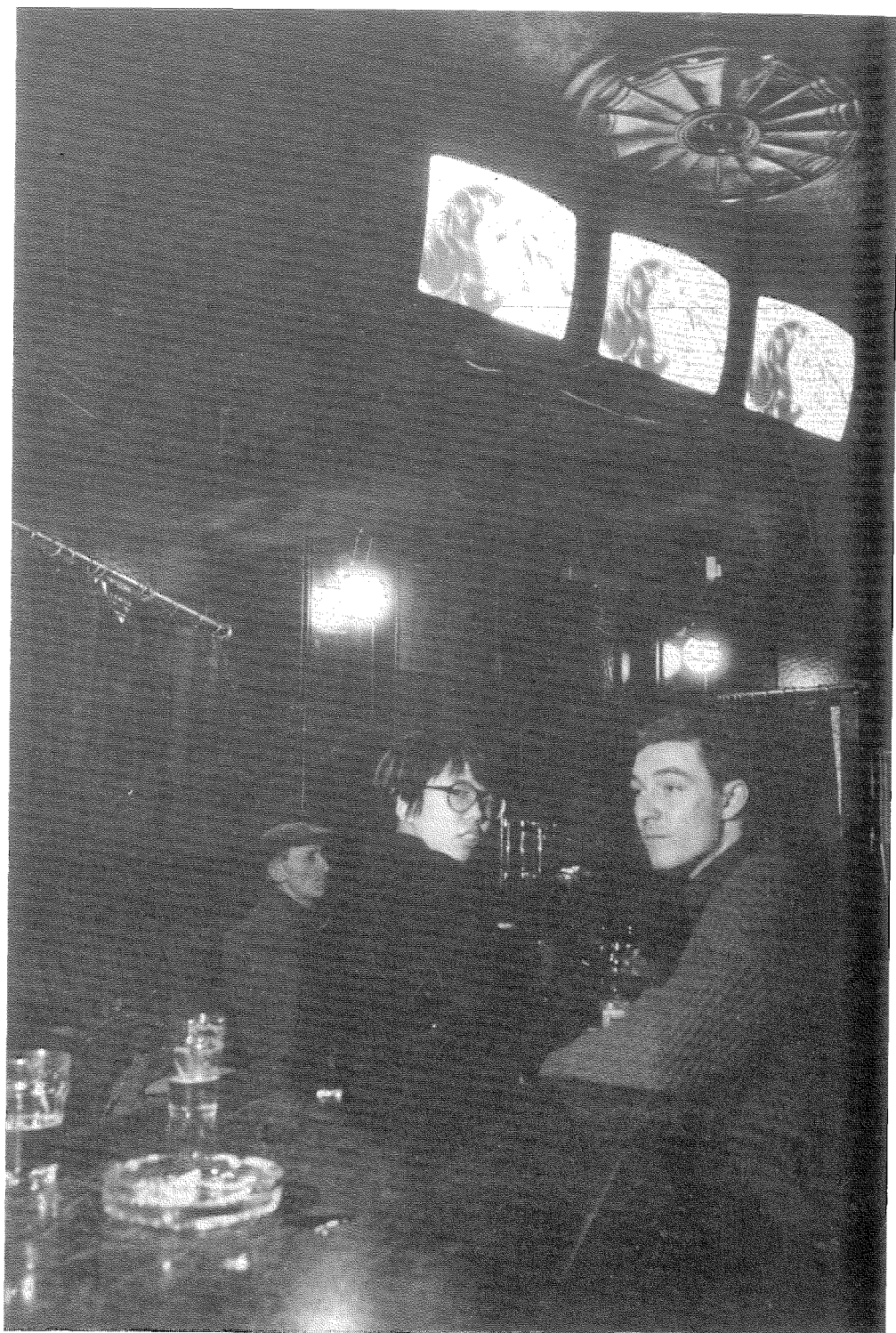
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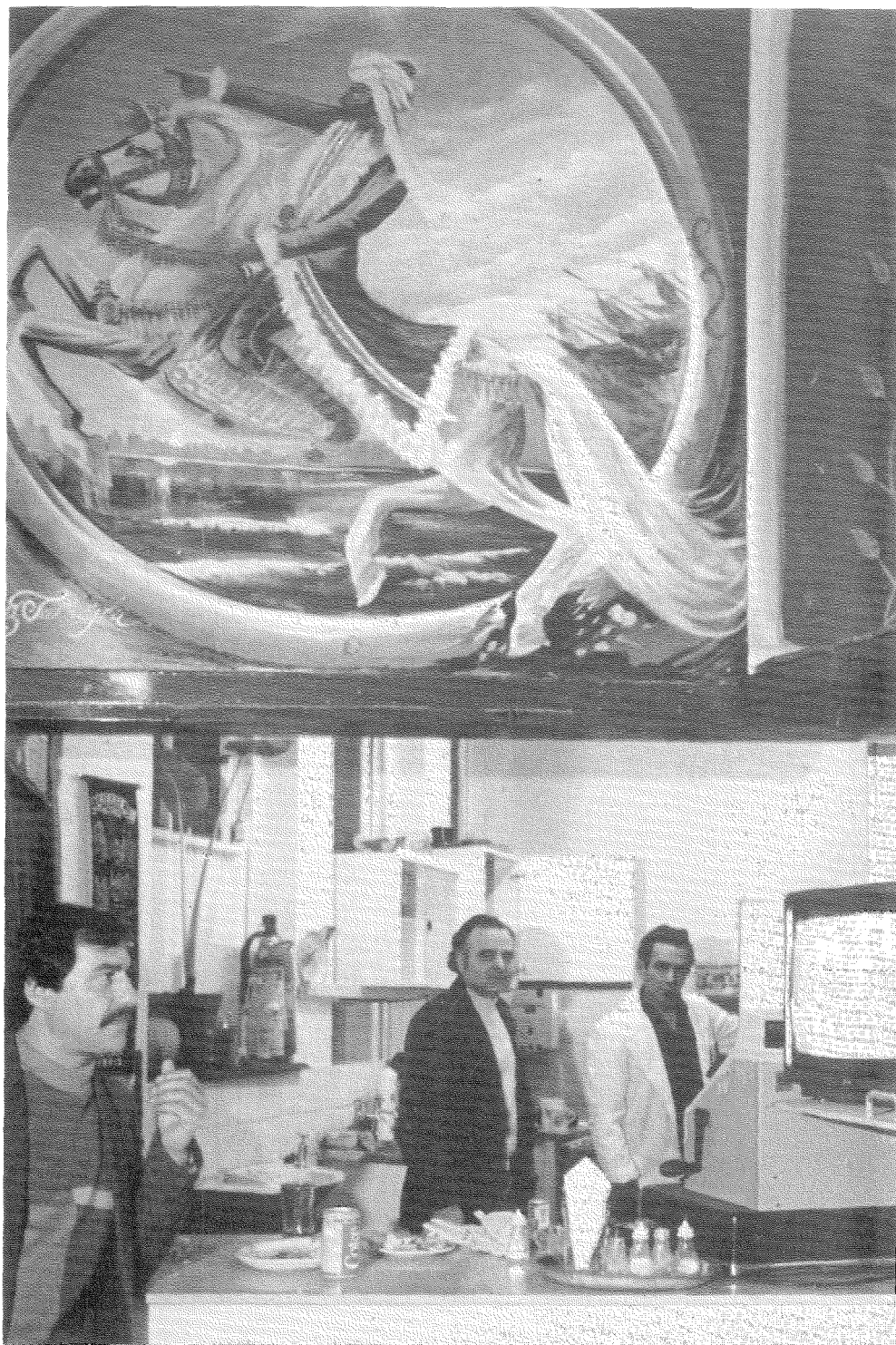
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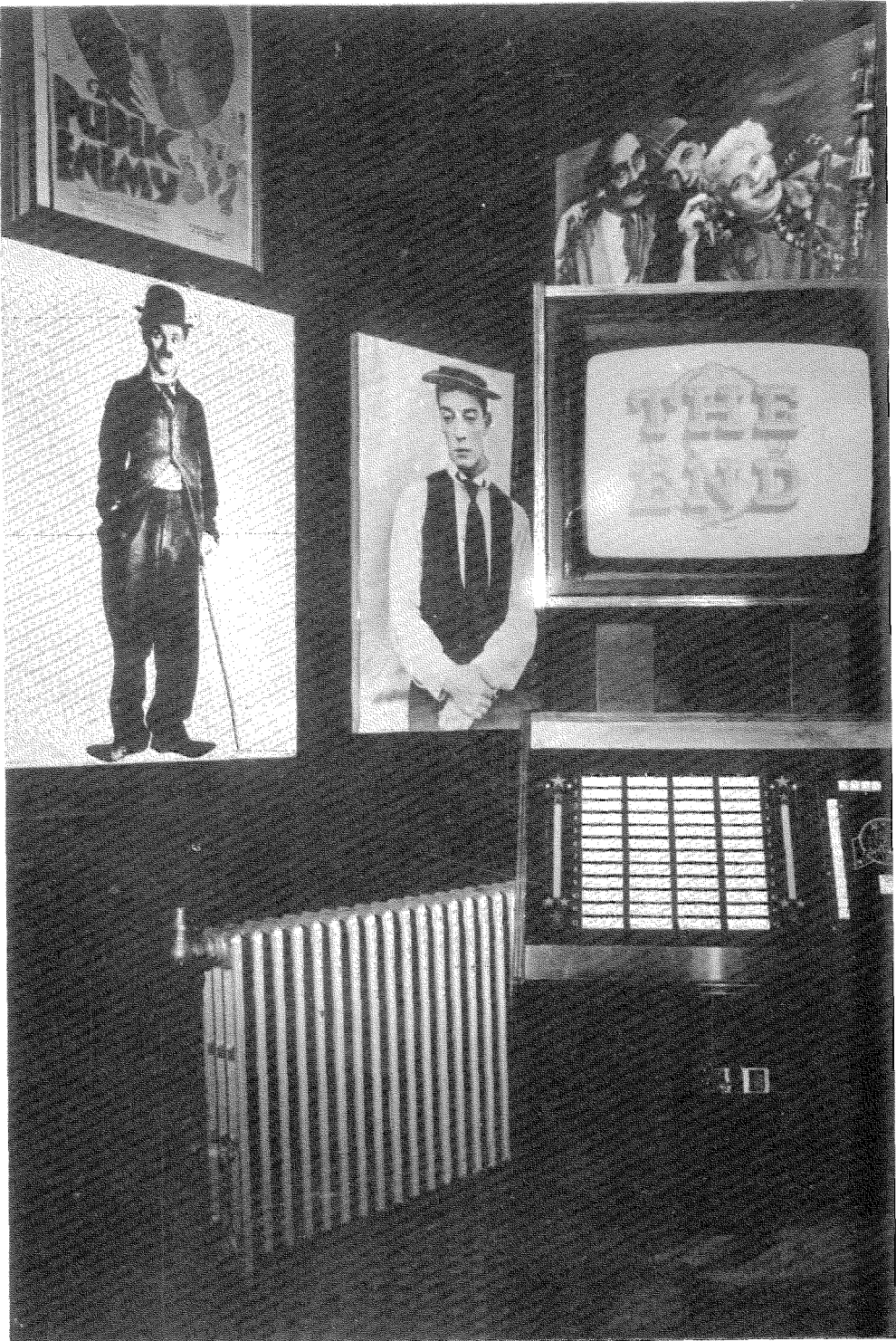
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